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ROBBERY AT PORTAGE BEND

This is a story of the Canadian Royal Northwest Mounted Police by one of them.

Exciting adventures are related in a gripping fashion of the trailing of a smuggler and murderer through the long stretches of the icebound North.

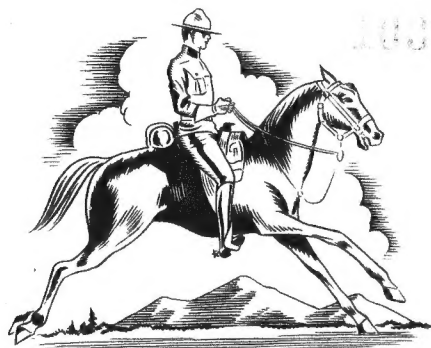
Captain Lund's characters are thoroughly alive; his dialogue is particularly good; and he vitally suggests the atmosphere of the vast Northern plains.

Adventures there are in plenty with an ample fund of humor.



ROBBERY AT PORTAGE BEND

*A story
of the Royal North-West
Mounted Police*



BY T. LUND

By the Same Author

WESTON OF THE ROYAL NORTH-WEST
MOUNTED POLICE

UP NORTH

THE MURDER OF DAVE BRANDON

IN THE SNOW: A ROMANCE OF THE
CANADIAN BACKWOODS

Published by CLAUDE KENDALL

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*All characters in this
book are fictitious*

ROBBERY AT PORTAGE BEND

CHAPTER I

THE BANK ROBBERY

"NINETEEN!" grunted Constable Wrenn, throwing his cards down on the table. He and Constable Douglas were spending their night-watch at a quiet game of cribbage in the barrack-room of the Royal North-West Mounted Police Barracks at Portage Bend. Though "barracks" was a rather pretentious term for the one-story, flat-roofed, wooden frame-structure which formed the headquarters of the Portage Bend detachment. One entered the building through a front office containing two cells of steel lattice-work, which looked somewhat like bird-cages. From the front office a short corridor led to the rear of the building. One door half-way down the corridor led to the barrack-room, where the three constables and the corporal had their quarters. Another door at the end of the corridor opened into the main office where the inspector-in-charge presided. Behind the main office were a few rooms which were intended for the inspector's quarters, and two store-rooms. As the inspector was a married man his quarters were unoccupied at present.

"I'm playing in luck, I am," announced Constable Douglas, spreading his hand triumphantly in front of him.

Wrenn, however, only threw a casual glance at the cards.

carefully hiding his envy. He yawned demonstratively and looked up at the clock hanging on the wall.

"Near twelve. I wonder where Curly and the corporal are?" he mused loudly.

"The answer to that is easy," grinned Douglas. "Curly will be pushing the ivory balls around one of the tables in the pool-room, and the corporal will be paying his respects to his lady-love. Fifteen-two, fifteen-four . . ."

"Nice girl, Joan Bancroft," interrupted Wrenn. "The corporal has certainly picked a stunner."

"He has. But do dry up for a second and give me a chance to figure out this beautiful hand. Fifteen-two, fifteen-four, fifteen-six, fifteen-eight, and two runs of fours make sixteen, and four pairs make twenty-four. . . ."

"Hey! Where do you get that stuff!" shouted Wrenn, instantly coming to life. "You can't make more than sixteen out of that hand. And you know it!"

"You go and chase yourself," suggested Douglas politely. "You must have neglected your arithmetics when you were at school. Now look here. Fifteen-two, fifteen-four, fif . . ."

But the value of that interesting hand was destined to remain a mystery for ever. Just as Douglas had got as far as fifteen-four, they heard the front door open, and running footsteps crossing the front office, continuing down the corridor. The next moment the door to the barrack-room was unceremoniously thrust open, and one of the workmen from the lumber-mill stuck his head into the room.

"Hey, boys!" he bawled. "There's trouble down at one o' them shacks by the river. Some Russians are havin' a feast, an' they's all drunk an' raisin' hell. Somebody came gallopin' along to the pool-room with the news, an' the corporal an' Wentworth streaked over. The corporal tol' me to chase along an' get you fellows."

The two constables hurriedly donned their tunics,

strapped on their pistols, and clapped their hats on their heads. Then they started at a run for the seat of trouble, easily outdistancing the more heavy-going messenger.

They had no trouble locating their objective. When they were still some distance away from the shacks by the river, which were occupied by a medley of workmen from the lumber-mill representing almost every nation of the Old World, the two officers could hear the shouts and din from violently excited humanity. The din rose to an ear-splitting crescendo when they at last burst through the open door of the house of festivity.

Inside a mass of people was milling and surging around, snarling, cursing and yelling while their arms rose and fell like flails. Pressed against the walls stood groups of wide-eyed, white-faced women and children, some screaming, some sobbing, and some doing both.

Douglas and Wrenn at a glance discovered the corporal and "Curly" Wentworth energetically trying to hammer a way to the centre of the trouble, and with an encouraging shout they flung themselves joyfully into the fray.

For a while there was some snappy action on the part of the men in scarlet; but gradually the fact began to penetrate to the liquor-sodden brains of the mob that the red-coats were right amongst them. And the realization had a sobering influence on them. Soon the crowd was trying to break up in a hurry, and men tried to squeeze through the doors at the same time, jamming there hopelessly till the pressure from behind cleared the jam to the detriment of doors and door-casings, which creaked and groaned their loud protests.

Soon the battlefield was cleared except for two big Russians, who were still snarling, spitting, and fighting like two wild-cats; but by the combined efforts of the attacking quartet, they were soon pried apart. But as they were still fairly oozing with fire and brimstone

Corporal Williams decided to bring them along to the barracks to cool off in the cells.

"Game beggars," grinned the corporal, when the two gladiators had been safely locked up in different cages. "Just look at them spitting at each other and trying to get hold of each other through the bars. Oh, well. They'll soon pop off to be-byes. Let's put out the light and go into our room to remove the signs of combat."

But some signs proved none-removable for the present. All could exhibit bruises, and Wrenn was sporting a glorious blue-black eye, which was fast closing.

"Hey, Willy! Your tunic is split down the back," called Douglas to the corporal.

"What!" yelled Williams, vainly trying to twist his head far enough over his shoulder to verify that disturbing statement. "Oh, hell! And this is my best tunic at that. Curse these Russians and their feasts! It's always the same. First they fill themselves up with booze, and then they start a free-for-all fight. And this is a dry town at that!"

He removed his tunic, held it up in front of him, and sadly surveyed the damage.

"Oh, well," he sighed philosophically. "I guess the tailor can make a fairly decent tunic out of what's left. But it will never be the tunic it used to be."

"Say, Willy, how did it happen that you were over in the pool-room? I thought you'd gone over to call on Joan Bancroft," said Douglas with the freedom born of long friendship.

"I was in the pool-room for the simple reason that I was playing pool with Curly. And besides, my movements are none of your dam'd business, my lad," answered the corporal politely.

"I can see you put on your best tunic to go over to the pool-room," jeered his indiscreet friend. "Bet you found that Tyson fellow hanging around when you

got over to the Bancrofts', and that you cleared out in disgust."

"I must admit that your admirable tact is your principal charm," commented Williams, surveying his friend with keen distaste. "But as I suppose you'll keep on harping on this subject till your inquisitive mind has found out all there is to find out, I'll confess that that accursed real-estate shark did turn up over there, and that I beat it. Now are you satisfied?"

"Can't say I admire your guts, though, letting yourself be routed by that dam' civilian," commented Douglas.

"Oh, well. Sorry about losing your admiration. But to tell the truth, I'm a strict adherent to the old adage, three is a crowd. And with Tyson there it's a mob. But as Tyson evidently couldn't see that for himself, I decided to give him a gentle hint. I hope he takes it, and doesn't come butting in in the future."

"Ha-ha! Tyson take a hint!" laughed Douglas with deep scorn. "That fellow is so stuck up and full of gall that he wouldn't take a hint except it was driven into him with a sledge-hammer. I thought you had more sense!"

"Perhaps you're right. Anyhow, I've no right to monopolize Joan Bancroft, and as I can't stick that Tyson guy there was nothing else for me to do but clear out. But let's get to bed. This little bit of healthy exercise has made me sleepy. Dash it, though, I wish they hadn't ruined my best tunic," he added ruefully, again inspecting the wreck with a sad shake of his head.

On the following morning, when Inspector Weston arrived at the barracks at his usual hour, eight o'clock, he looked far from pleased when Corporal Williams rendered his report of the preceding night's fracas.

"Dash it all, Corporal!" he exclaimed with a deep frown of annoyance. "These affairs are getting too frequent lately. The booze-smuggling seems to have

increased tremendously for the last three or four months. As I have said before, I have an idea that there is somebody with brains and money behind this flooding of our so-called dry town. In spite of our unceasing vigilance it keeps on flowing. And when we catch a few boot-leggers, they all seem to be able to fork out the requisite cash for their fines without any difficulty whatever. It really looks as if there is some organizing genius behind it all. You say last night's was a bad affair? "

" One of the worst we've had so far, sir. Booze had certainly been flowing freely at that feast. Normally these Russians scatter for shelter as soon as we appear, but last night we had to go full out to hammer sense into the merry revellers. Wrenn got a beauty of a black eye, sir. And we were all fairly covered with scars of battle. And the blighters ruined my best tunic, sir," ended Williams with an injured air, airing his pet grievance. " They certainly seemed top heavy with booze, all of them. We had to bring along two warriors who simply refused to quit."

" Too bad about your tunic," commented Weston. " We'll have to try and wangle a new one for you. However, as you say, there must certainly have been a steady stream of booze flowing at that feast last night to make those fellows so fighting mad. They are generally a rather docile crowd. They say money is pretty tight in this town just now; but when it comes to buying booze they all seem to have a few shekels handy. But we have to try and clamp the lid on all this hilarity. We must get right down to it, and find out whose is the guiding hand behind this flow of booze which threatens to swamp this fair town of ours. We shall have to . . ."

He broke off and listened, while Williams turned towards the door which stood open into the corridor. The sound of a voice raised in loud excitement came from the outer office. As soon as the voice fell silent, hurried

footsteps came along the corridor, and Constable Douglas entered the room and clicked to attention.

"Sir, a report has just come in that the safe in the bank was rifled last night, and that the night watchman was killed," he announced, trying to keep his voice steady in spite of his vivid excitement.

"What's that?" snapped Weston sharply. "The bank was robbed and the night watchman killed? Who brought in the report?" He sounded as if he found it difficult to believe his own ears.

"One of the clerks, sir. He's out in the office now. Shall I bring him in?"

"Why, certainly. Bring him in at once."

The clerk soon appeared. He was a young man who seemed badly scared and shaken. He had some difficulty in controlling his voice, but by an effort of will he managed to stammer forth his story fairly coherently.

He had arrived at the bank that morning at eight o'clock, according to his customary routine. He was somewhat puzzled when the night watchman was not there to open the door for him as usual. He knocked several times at the door, but the watchman did not appear. He then tried the handle of the door, and to his surprise he found it unlocked. He pushed the door open, and to his horror he found the body of the watchman lying huddled on the floor of the small lobby, the head lying face downward in a pool of blood.

Almost frantic with fear he had slammed the door shut, and had run to the manager's house close by. The manager had hurried back with him. They found the watchman's body cold and almost rigid. He had evidently been killed by some crushing blows on the head by some heavy weapon. Investigating further, they had found the safe blown open. The manager was there now, checking up on the contents to see what was missing, and he had sent the clerk over to report the matter to the police.

"Come on, Corporal," said Weston grimly, as soon as the clerk had finished his story. "And tell Douglas to come along with us."

The three officers and the clerk hurried along to the bank, which stood in an isolated lot of ground a couple of blocks away from the barracks. They found a small crowd already assembled in front of the building. News of any exciting event travelled fast in that small community. The small band of people were staring with morbid curiosity and awe at the closed doors.

"Post yourself in front of the doors, Douglas," ordered Weston. "And admit nobody but the bank's officials. And try to persuade this crowd to go away. Tell them there won't be anything for them to see."

Weston knocked at the heavy doors, which were immediately opened by another white-faced clerk. The two officers entered, accompanied by the messenger. As soon as they were inside Weston ordered the doors to be locked behind them.

In the small lobby a gruesome sight met their eyes. Sprawled grotesquely on the grey stone tiles, in the light filtering through the heavily barred windows in the double entrance doors, lay the lifeless body of John Mitchell, the night watchman. Around his head was a wide pool of dark red blood, which was now dry.

The inspector knelt down by the body, and carefully examined the battered head. Whatever weapon had inflicted the wounds must have been wielded with vicious, ruthless force. The crown and back of the head had literally been smashed in.

"Looks as if it has been done by a length of gas-pipe or some such instrument," he muttered to Williams as he rose to his feet. "Those bandits were evidently not taking any chances. They have certainly been grimly determined to silence the poor beggar for ever. But let us go inside and find the manager."

They found the members of the staff standing in a group before the safe. As soon as the manager saw the officers he hurried towards them.

"This is a ghastly affair, Weston," he said in a voice husky with emotion. "I'm not so much referring to the bank's loss as to poor Mitchell's fate," he added.

"It certainly is a nasty business," agreed Weston. "Have you got any idea how much the bandits got away with?"

"We haven't been able to make a thorough check yet, but as far as we can make out they have got away with somewhat near twenty thousand dollars in currency and easily negotiable bonds. They certainly knew what to choose. But the bank is insured against burglary, so the loss does not really mean anything to us. If they had only spared poor Mitchell," he ended with feeling.

"Yes. It's a great pity," said Weston. "But I want to have a look at that safe."

They walked over to the big, somewhat old-fashioned safe built into the rear wall. The members of the staff drew to one side to make room for the two officers.

Weston examined the safe carefully, and then grunted:

"H'm. This job has certainly not been done by any bungling amateurs. It looks too clean-cut for that. They have used just enough explosives to blow the door open. Look, the door itself is almost intact. An amateur would, in most cases, have used enough explosives to damage the door completely, and probably the contents of the safe. But whoever did this certainly knew his or their job. It decidedly points towards experts at the trade, and pretty efficient experts at that. Do you know how they got into the bank in the first place, Fraser?" he addressed the manager. "Had the doors been forced open?"

"They had not, and that is the most puzzling part of the affair," answered the manager. "It looks as if Mitchell himself had unlocked the doors. We found the

key in the inside keyhole. But how they persuaded him to unlock the door is more than I can explain."

"That part of the puzzle is pretty self-evident, I think," observed Weston thoughtfully. "I expect the bandit or bandits—I expect there were more of them—must have been well known to Mitchell. You know the townspeople pretty well, Corporal," he said, turning to Williams. "Do you know of anybody who was friendly with Mitchell, and who at the same time could fit into a job like this?"

Williams thought for a few moments, and then shook his head in slow regret.

"No, sir. I knew Mitchell quite well, and he was on friendly terms with most people around here. Anyhow, though we have a few hard characters around the town, I don't know of anybody who would be desperate enough to tackle a job like this."

"All right. We'll go fully into that later," said Weston. "Now I should like to have a look at the entrance doors."

But the oak doors yielded no useful information. They merely bore out the manager's previous statement. There were no signs that they had been tampered with in any way. The night watchman's key was still sticking in the inside keyhole. It was fairly obvious, therefore, that he must have opened the doors himself to the intruders.

Inspector Weston shook his head impatiently, a frown on his face.

"This looks a pretty difficult job," he said to Williams. "Not a clue anywhere. There are no distinct footmarks to show anything, nor have I been able to discover a hand- or finger-print anywhere. I'm afraid this is going to prove a hard nut to crack. However, there's nothing more to learn around here, so you had better arrange to have the body removed to the mortuary. And get Dr. Steele to determine approximately how long the body has been dead. There'll have to be an autopsy,

of course. I shall make all arrangements about that with the doctor, and also for the inquest. Come back to the barracks as soon as you can, Corporal. I want to discuss this matter with you."

About an hour later Williams was back in the office.

"Well, what did the doctor have to say?" asked Weston.

"He said Mitchell must have been dead from seven to nine hours, sir."

Weston nodded his head.

"That's what I thought myself. And it fits in with an idea which has occurred to me. I'll admit it is a rather fantastical and far-fetched idea; but even so, it's worth following up. At least it is the only semblance of an opening I can see at present. Pull up a chair, Corporal, and I'll tell you all about it.

"Now, let's first go over all we know," he continued as soon as Williams was seated. "First: if Mitchell opened the door himself to the intruders, and everything points towards that, he must have been rather intimate with whoever entered. And further he could have had no suspicion of foul play. And that seems to prove that the man or men who entered could not have been any of the town hoodlums. Mitchell would certainly have too much sense to open the door to any suspicious characters. Secondly: we know that the job must have been carried out by somebody to whom cracking safes was no novelty. Now, do these facts suggest anything to you at all?"

Williams shook his head.

"No, sir, they do not. I can't think of anybody round here whom I would suspect of being a safe-cracking expert. In fact, I've been thinking matters over pretty thoroughly, sir, and I can't think of one person whom I could reasonably suspect. Neither amongst Mitchell's friends nor amongst the rest of the townspeople."

"Same here," admitted Weston. "Of course, there

is such a stream of fellows passing in and out of this town, so there might easily be a few roving safe-crackers amongst them without our being aware of the fact. That's the curse of being a gateway to the North. All sorts of characters pass backwards and forwards, and it's quite impossible for us to keep track of them all. Especially so at this time of the year, when the trappers are preparing to go up for the fall trapping. But seeing the bandits must have been well known to Mitchell, it seems probable that the job was not executed by any stray visitors. Except, of course, they were outsiders working in collusion with some individual from town. But we'll leave that for the present, and get on to my idea. Now, seeing Mitchell had been dead for some eight hours or so, that fixes the crime at what time? "

" Somewhere between eleven and one last night, I should say, sir."

" Just so. And where were you and the constables around that time? "

" Well, Constable Wentworth and I were playing a game of pool, and later . . ." The corporal broke off and leaned forward in his chair, looking eagerly at the inspector. " By Jove, sir! " he exclaimed. " Do you think there is any connection between that fracas and the job at the bank? "

" Well, yes. I must admit the idea occurred to me, though, as I said before, it's rather fanciful," answered Weston with a smile. " But on the other hand, it seems too much of a coincidence that the affair over at the bank should take place almost at the identical hour when you all were busy down by the river, and when the attention of the town would naturally be turned in that direction. I have sent for the fellow who was master of ceremonies at that feast last night, and he should be here presently. He may help to throw some light on the subject. I have already questioned the two warriors you brought in last

night, but they could give me no information. They had only been casual guests. It was really what you said about the riot's having been unusually hectic which put this idea into my head. It occurred to me that somebody might have helped to speed things up. Yes, Wrenn?" he asked, as the latter appeared in the open doorway.

"That Russian, Markowitz, is here now, sir. Do you want to see him at once?"

"Yes. Bring him in right away."

A few moments later Wrenn ushered in a stocky, swarthy man, with dark hair and a big, bushy beard. He looked sulky and uneasy.

"Good morning, Markowitz," greeted the inspector.

"Do you speak English?"

"Yes. Me speak some."

"Good. Where did you get your booze from last night?" continued Weston, his voice friendly. He knew he could get more information out of these children of nature by kindness than by sternness.

The Russian shuffled his feet and looked still more uncomfortable.

"Me buy it," he said at last.

"And from whom did you buy it?"

"From one half-breed. Me not know his name."

"And how much booze did you buy from that half-breed?" continued Weston, not pressing the matter of identity.

"Two cases."

"And do you mean to tell me that two cases of booze were sufficient to make you all so drunk as you were last night? Are you quite sure that was all the booze you had?"

"No. Me have more. Me had four cases given as present from manager o' mill," was the surprising answer.

"You had what?" asked Weston sharply.

"Me got four cases as present from manager o' mill," repeated Markowitz.

An alert gleam of interest shot into Weston's eyes. He felt he was getting warm. He felt quite certain that MacLean had never sent those cases. He knew the dour old Scotchman too well for that. But whoever had sent them had most likely used MacLean's name as a blind.

"Tell me all about that present from Mr. MacLean, Markowitz," he said. "When did you get those cases, and who brought them to your house?"

"Team drive up to my house nine or mebbe ten o'clock las' night. Driver him say he bring four cases o' booze from manager o' mill. He say, manager know we have feast, an' he wants us 'ave good time."

"Did you know that driver?"

"No. Me no see him good. It was dark, an' he sit in his seat. I no look much at 'im, bein' busy takin' down cases."

"I see. Did you recognize the team at all?" was Weston's next question.

"No. Me not look much at anything. Me had few drinks then, an' not care much for lookin' at anything," he confessed frankly. "Me just happy gettin' present o' booze, free for nothin'."

Weston suppressed a smile.

"You can't tell me anything more about that booze, then?" he asked.

"Yes. Booze taste dam' good, all right." The answer came with considerable relish and conviction, and despite strong efforts it proved impossible for the inspector and his two subordinates to suppress their grins.

"Is that all you can tell me about that present?" asked Weston.

"That all. Me swear that," said Markowitz earnestly.

"All right. I suppose you've told me all you know," observed Weston. "And now I want to give you a word

of warning. There is too much drunkenness, and too much rioting at these feasts of yours. Next time there is any more of this rough stuff like last night's, I'm going to have the whole bunch of you hauled in front of the magistrate. And then you'll be fined. And the fines will be pretty stiff and heavy. Do you understand? "

" Yes. Me onderstan'."

" Right. Then tell all your friends that if they want to save lots of money, they'd better go more easy the next time they have a celebration. Is that quite clear to you? "

" You bet."

" Very well. You can go now, but don't forget my advice."

Markowitz turned and shuffled out, followed by Wrenn.

" Well? " asked Weston, looking at Williams with a smile.

" It certainly begins to look as if you were quite right, sir."

" It does. But just as a matter of form, you'd better go over to the mills and see Mr. MacLean right away. Though I'm willing to bet a month's pay that this business is news to him."

Corporal Williams departed at once on his mission. Three-quarters of an hour later he was back again.

" Well, what had Mr. McLean got to say about his present of booze? " asked Weston, looking up from the papers on his desk.

" I should hate to repeat his exact words, sir," answered Williams with a broad grin. " He denied positively, and with some force, that he had ever sent any booze to any Russian feast. In fact, he was most emphatic about it, not to say blasphemous. He actually seemed to consider the mere imputation as a blot on his character, sir. He swore energetically that we would see him in some hot place sooner than he would waste any booze on those *blankety-blank* Russian bohunks."

Weston laughed.

"I rather expected you'd hear something of the sort," he chuckled. "And this seems to settle the matter. I feel quite confident that someone in that gang of booze-smugglers we are up against is mixed up in the bank robbery. If we find the brains of that gang, I'm willing to bet that we won't have far to look for the bandits. But it's going to be the devil's own job. We don't know anything positive about that gang of whisky runners. We only suspect that it exists, though the suspicion is very sound. And even if we do succeed in rounding up the gang, we shall have a hard time pinning that bank job on any member of the gang. Though we may be able to pick up some evidence, of course, when we know in what direction to look. So our first consideration will be to find out the identity of all the members of that gang.

"Now, I'm going to get one of our best detectives up here at once. He can nose around and see what he can pick up about that bank job. In the meantime we shall concentrate all our energies on getting a line on the smugglers. I'll get hold of Angus McKenzie, and have him and his Indian and half-breed friends do some scouting for us. They might be able to pick up something that might give us a lead. And I hope that by patience and vigilance we shall be able to get somewhere in time. Though I'm afraid we have a long and twisted trail ahead of us," he ended with a thoughtful frown.

He was right. But even so he did not suspect even approximately how long and how twisted that trail would eventually prove to be.

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CHAPTER II

JOAN BANCROFT

JOAN BANCROFT and her brother Roy lived alone in a neat, fair-sized bungalow at the outskirts of the town. Just beyond their house was the fringe of the spruce forest, which formed a half-circle around the town, each end of the crescent resting on the banks of the broad Saskatchewan River, which skirted the town in a sweeping bend.

Their father, for years the assistant manager of the Northern Lumber Company's mills, had died a few years previously. They had lost their mother when they were still youngsters.

After their father's death they had continued living at Portage Bend. The bungalow was their own property, having been left them jointly by their father. And as the little town on the edge of the northern wilderness had been their home from as far back as they could remember, they saw no reason why they should change residence. Joan, at least, was really fond of the town and its surroundings. She loved roaming around in the resin-scented woods in the summer-time, and to take trips in her canoe on the river. And the cold, white winter even held a certain fascination for her. She found a never-flagging interest in watching the stream of dog-teams, guided by rough-looking sons of the woods, which kept coming and going, bringing loads of fur into the town from the far North, and leaving with sleighs piled high with provisions

for far-away places. And even the stinging, blinding blizzards, which periodically howled through the town during the winter, held no terror for her. The warm, snug security of her home even gave her an added sense of well-being in its contrast to the raging, shrieking tempest outside.

Joan was now twenty years old, while Roy was her senior by four years. Their father had left them a modest income, enough to live on by careful management. This income was somewhat augmented by Roy's earnings, though it must be admitted that his contribution to their joint exchequer was not startling by its liberality. However, they managed quite well as it was.

Roy had, from boyhood, had a rather roving disposition. After he had reached the age of eighteen he had spent several seasons up in the northern woods, trapping. But after his father's death he had stayed at home. He had some hazy idea that as the present head of the family he was in duty bound to remain at home and look after his young sister.

He held some sort of position in Mr. Tyson's real-estate business, and at first he seemed fairly satisfied with his new mode of living. But gradually Joan began to notice that he appeared unsettled and restless. He mostly stayed out late at night, and when he finally arrived home the odour of his breath told Joan that he had been drinking. Occasionally he arrived home in an atrocious temper, and it was almost impossible to get a civil word out of him. Though the following morning he was generally very penitent and apologetic.

Joan had a suspicion that he spent his evenings gambling, and that his periodical attacks of ill-humour were caused by financial losses; but she asked no questions.

Periodically Roy went away for several days at a stretch on the firm's business, and when he arrived home

from these trips he always seemed in better humour for a few days. And he invariably brought home some small present for Joan.

But as time went on his moodiness and irritability increased, and especially lately Joan had begun to notice a deplorable change in him. When he was at home he generally sat silent, with a brooding air about him. He was often the worse for liquor, and it happened not infrequently that he arrived home at a late hour, drunk and boisterous.

Joan grew more and more concerned. She saw him slip farther and farther into the slough of dissipation, and she began to be afraid that he would eventually become completely submerged.

At last, one day when he had just returned from one of his trips and was in a fairly reasonable humour, Joan decided to tackle him on the subject, and she also wanted to try to persuade him to break away from his present surroundings.

"Listen, Roy," she said. "Why don't you go out trapping this fall? You don't seem to feel very happy and content in town, so I feel certain a change would do you good. You were always so fond of the free life in the woods."

"How can I go away?" countered Roy. "I can't leave you here to shift for yourself."

Joan laughed.

"Don't you worry about me. I'm quite capable of looking after myself. I'm no baby any more. If that's all that's keeping you here, then just forget all about it and go right ahead with your preparations for a season's trapping."

"It doesn't seem right leaving you here alone," said Roy. "And besides, it would be foolish of me to throw up a good job when I've got it."

"Is your present job really so good?" asked Joan,

looking searchingly at him. "It doesn't appear to me as if there was a desperate amount of money in it."

Roy squirmed a little. He had no answer to that. He couldn't very well tell Joan that the bulk of his earnings was spent on poker, booze, and other unmentionable dissipations.

"Oh, I don't know," he said a little sulkily. "It's not a bad job as jobs go these days. At least it's steady. What would I find for my idle hands to do next spring, when I come down from the trapping camp? You wouldn't expect Tyson to give me back my old job after I had deserted him, would you?"

"I'm sure Mr. MacLean would give you a job at the mills," answered Joan. "He has offered you a job down there before, but you refused to take it."

"Some job that would be working my hands off down at the mills. MacLean is only a slave-driver. And I can't see why I should take a job like that when I've got one already that's a darn sight more pleasant. The one I have is plenty good enough for me."

"Seems to me that if you want a job in town just for the reason of looking after me, the one down at the mills would suit you better," remarked Joan shrewdly. "You wouldn't have to make all those trips out of town then. What do you do on those trips, anyhow?"

"Oh, selling real estate and that sort of thing. I'm the salesman of the concern," answered Roy. "Anyhow, I don't go away oftener than once or twice each month. And I don't stay away for longer than three or four days each time. Surely you are able to look after yourself for those few days."

"Oh, rather. I just told you I should be able to look after myself all the time," smiled Joan. "It seems to be your idea that I can't shift for myself."

But the next moment her face was grave, and she looked at Roy with an air of doubt and anxiety. She

was a little afraid that he would be offended at what she wanted to say to him next.

"Now I want to be quite frank with you, Roy," she said at last. "And I don't want you to be offended, because I'm only speaking for your own good. I have noticed that you've been drinking too much lately. Far too much. If you continue, you are certain to make yourself ill."

Roy flushed a dull red at this direct candour.

"I'm not drinking more than the other fellows," he muttered defiantly. "At least, I'm not drinking enough to make me sick. Not by a long shot. A fellow needs a little fun occasionally."

Joan sighed.

"I suppose so," she admitted without conviction. "But it seems to me that those occasions have been coming around rather frequently lately. So I really wish you would go away for a while. I can see that you are far from happy in town."

"It's no good, Sis. I don't feel like going out trapping," said Roy stubbornly. "As I said before, I have to stay around here and look after you. You are too darn good-looking to be left alone amongst all the fresh fellows in town."

Joan laughed and blushed a little at this frank, brotherly compliment.

"I think you're rather over-estimating my charms. At least, I haven't noticed any rush in my direction by the lads of the village. Apart from Mr. Tyson and Corporal Williams, I hardly have any calls at all from the opposite sex."

"You know darn well that a lot of fellows in town are rather struck on you," persisted Roy. "Anyhow, Tyson and the corporal are around here pretty steadily. There's hardly an evening that one or both of them don't call."

"What about it? There is nothing wrong in that, I suppose. One of them is your boss and friend, and the other is a respectable member of the police. So they ought to be perfectly safe. Anyhow, you can't expect me to spend all my evenings alone while you are seeking your pleasure elsewhere?" asked Joan a little accusingly.

"I didn't say there was anything wrong in it. I guess the corporal is all right. He seems a decent sort of a fellow. But"—Roy hesitated for a few moments while he pressed tobacco into his pipe with elaborate care—"well, what I meant to say was, that I don't think Tyson is the right sort of fellow to hang around you," he blurted finally.

Joan looked keenly at him.

"And what is the matter with Mr. Tyson?" she demanded. "I thought he was your friend as well as being your employer. Is there anything shady about him since you warn me against him?"

"Of course there isn't," answered Roy hurriedly. "You don't think I would have anything to do with him if there was, do you?" he added virtuously. "No, he's all right as far as I'm concerned. But there's lots of fellows who are all right with men, but who can't be trusted with women. And Tyson is one of them, I suspect. He's too slick and smooth, if you see what I mean. And he has a sort of smug smile on his face always when he's talking to you, just as if he feels quite sure that you admire him and his winning ways. Looks so darn cocksure and satisfied that you'll fall for him. Well, I can't quite express what I mean, but I don't think he's just the right fellow for you to play around with."

Joan threw back her head and laughed, showing her white, even teeth.

"Now you're really being funny, Roy," she chortled. "I'll admit that Mr. Tyson is pretty conceited and struck on himself, but I haven't seen any signs yet that he's a wolf in sheep's clothing. And besides, it will take a rather

hefty wolf to gobble up me. If ever Mr. Tyson shows signs of taking too much for granted, he'll find himself out in the cold pretty quickly. I'm quite capable of looking after myself, so don't you worry about that."

"Well, I've warned you," said Roy. "So don't blame me if he starts any funny work. I tell you, it will be much the better for you to see as little of that fellow as possible."

"Well, what do you expect me to do about it? He has always behaved all right so far, so I can't very well slam the door in his face when he calls, can I? Particularly not since he's your friend and employer."

"No. But you can discourage him as much as possible. Be a bit distant and cold to him, you know."

"Don't be absurd, Roy! How can I discourage him without being rude? And so far I have seen no signs of disrespect or anything of the sort in his attitude towards me. In fact, he's been rather good company. He's quite amusing, you know. So there is absolutely not the slightest cause for me to be either cold or distant to him. But when you are so concerned about his visits, why don't you go away as I asked you to do? Because I'm decent to him more for your sake than my own. If you quit working for him I needn't receive him at all, you know," ended Joan, trying to be diplomatic.

"That's right, put the blame on me," grumbled Roy. "But I tell you straight, I don't want to go out trapping. I don't think I could stand prowling around out there attending to traps with the thermometer registering a snappy forty or fifty below zero. Brrrrr! It would about kill me now, when I ain't used to it. Gosh, you keep harping on that string pretty energetically. I really think you want to get rid of me," he ended in an aggrieved tone of voice.

"You know quite well I don't want anything of the sort," answered Joan reproachfully. "I'm too fond of

you for that. I only wanted you to go away for your own good."

"I know, Sis. And I didn't really mean what I said. But, honestly, I can't go away just now. We've got some deals on that I shall have to handle. But I'll tell you what I'll do: I'll let up on the drinking since it seems to worry you so. Though there's really no cause for you to worry at all. I know how to handle booze."

"Well, I suppose there's no use arguing about that any more then," said Joan resignedly, a touch of disappointment in her voice. "But I really think a trip into the woods for a time would do you a lot of good. You've seemed so restless and dissatisfied with life lately."

"That's because I've had quite a few worries lately. We always have quite a few in our game. The real-estate game, I mean. But I'll try to be more cheerful in future, and I'll stay at home more. I'm afraid I've neglected you a bit, but then a fellow never stops to think when he gets together with the bunch. Anyhow . . ." He broke off and listened. "There's somebody coming up the steps to the porch," he announced. "I'll bet it's either Tyson or the corporal. The corporal," he amended, as a faint jingle of spurs intermingled with the firm footsteps crossing the front verandah.

Roy was right. It was Corporal Williams who entered, following a knock on the door and Joan's hospitable: "Come in."

"Good evening," greeted Williams with a cheerful smile as he found his rival was not present. "May I come in for a while?"

"Oh, certainly," smiled Joan. "Sit down and make yourself at home."

"Thanks ever so much," said Williams, hanging his Stetson up on the clothes-rack by the door. "Feels nice and warm in here," he continued appreciatively, sinking into a chair. "It's quite chilly outside. The nights are

certainly getting cooler. I expect freeze-up will be here in another month or so."

"Yes, the temperature is dropping," agreed Joan. "Are you very busy these days?"

"Oh, so-so. What with booze-running and bank-hold-ups and one thing and another we're kept pretty well on the hop."

"Got a line on that bank business, and the murder of Mitchell yet?" asked Roy.

"No, we haven't got very far yet," admitted Williams. "But we have got one of our best detectives up here, so I expect we'll get somewhere soon. If anybody can get results, he will."

"That was a terrible affair," said Joan gravely. "Poor Mr. Mitchell. He was such a nice man. I hear his wife and two children have got a pension from the bank."

"Yes. The bank was quite generous considering the circumstances. The fact can't be denied that Mitchell was guilty of carelessness in opening the door that night. And besides it was against his orders. But of course there may have been some very good reason for his apparent neglect of duties. Whoever committed the crime must have been clever, so I expect the trap was very well baited. They certainly haven't made any slip as far as we can see."

"Do you think there have been more than one on the job, since you say 'they'?" asked Roy.

"Well, yes. Certain bruises on the body indicate that Mitchell was held, and that a hand was clapped firmly over his mouth to prevent him from crying out. And as it would be impossible for one man to hold him, keep one hand clapped over his mouth, and to deliver those vicious blows that killed him at the same time, we can safely assume that there must have been at least two of them. Sergeant Ware, our detective, also says that there are other indications pointing towards more than one man."

"I sincerely hope your detective catches the wretches," said Joan. "Do you think somebody from this town did it? It would be a horrible thought to feel that these murderers might be walking right amongst us," she ended with a shudder.

"Well, I'm afraid at least one of them must have been somebody from town," said Williams slowly. "Somebody whom Mitchell knew. And I further think it must be an individual whom nobody would suspect of having criminal tendencies, or else Mitchell would hardly have been tricked into opening the doors. He was a pretty shrewd fellow. But don't feel alarmed, Miss Joan. Whoever did it will be certain to lie low for some time to come. They'll hardly try any more tricks as long as we are investigating their former crime."

"Oh, I was not afraid for my own sake," smiled Joan. "There is no wealth around here to tempt any criminal. But it does seem such a ghoulisn idea that one might walk around rubbing shoulders with a cold-blooded murderer."

"Oh, for the love of Mike, quit talking about that rotten business," exclaimed Roy, totally ignoring the fact that he had started the subject. "I'm fed up hearing about it. Wherever I go people are discussing that darn bank robbery!"

"I quite agree with Roy," said Williams. "All this talk about murder and bloodshed is not fit for your ears, Miss Joan." He smiled at her. He deplored the presence of Roy, or else he might have been able to give a more artistic and ardent touch to his words. Though he was honest enough to register a mental "perhaps," for Williams knew that he was no adept at what he somewhat contemptuously termed "soft talk," when he referred to its application by others. And particularly by that fellow Tyson. Williams had to admit that Tyson was a good talker who knew how to express himself. But his talk

was too smooth, according to Williams, so smooth that it almost made him sick to listen. That was the main reason why he generally cleared out when Tyson showed up. It was more than he could stand to sit there in dumb discomfort while Tyson's ever-ready tongue was ranging from subject to subject with a few adroit compliments thrown in for the benefit of their hostess.

So the evening certainly lost its glamour entirely as far as Williams was concerned when Tyson turned up about half an hour later. Williams resented the new-comer's well-groomed appearance, the easy familiarity with which he seemed to take his welcome for granted, and his insinuating ways.

"Hello, everybody," greeted the real-estate dealer cheerily. "You here, Corporal?" he continued in pretended surprise, while Williams strove valiantly to cloak his real feelings behind a front of bored indifference. "I thought you would be out somewhere chasing clues and whatnots."

"I'm giving the clues a rest this evening," answered Williams, forcing a grin.

"I hear you've got a detective up here to teach you fellows your jobs," continued Tyson patronizingly.

"Not to teach us our jobs, exactly," corrected Williams. "Our jobs lie quite a bit apart. His is the duty to point to the right man, and then we do the rest."

"I suppose this fellow is a regular Sherlock Holmes," suggested Tyson with a grin. "One of those chaps who can deduct from a knot in a fellow's shoe-string what he has been up to the night before, I mean."

"Oh, I don't think he pretends to be quite as clever as all that," answered Williams quietly, refusing to rise to the bait. "But he has tackled a few jobs in the past which were quite as difficult as this one, and somehow he's generally managed to find the guilty party."

"Clever fellow," remarked Tyson with false admiration.

"Well, I suppose your Mr. Sherlock has got his pockets full of clues already?"

"I don't think his pockets are quite bursting with them, but he certainly has picked up a clue or two," said Williams, finding it more and more difficult to keep his rising resentment in check at Tyson's continuous sarcastic jabs.

"And which way are his clues pointing? Or perhaps that's a deep secret?"

"It is. A deep, dark secret," answered Williams with a thin smile.

"What a pity you can't arrest a clue, and have it hauled up in court on charges of assault and battery, murder, misdemeanour, and all the rest of it," grinned Tyson maliciously. "It would make the game so much easier, as it were."

"Yes, I suppose it would," agreed Williams. "But seeing that's out of the question, we do the next best thing and arrest the person we find at the end of our clue."

"When, or if, you get to the end of the clue. Some clues have a nasty habit of doubling back on themselves and forming a circle, I understand," remarked Tyson with the same mocking smile. "But I suppose your admirable Mr. Sherlock will get somewhere soon. I notice he's buzzing around pretty energetically, canvassing our respectable, peaceful citizens. Their outstanding intelligence and powers of penetration should be of valuable assistance to your sleuth."

"I shouldn't be surprised if you're right, or else Sergeant Ware would hardly waste his time on them. But if you don't mind we'll switch the subject. I'm quite sure all this rot can't be of the slightest interest to Miss Bancroft."

"I disagree with you there," smiled Tyson. "I should imagine the epic of the valiant deeds of you human blood-

hounds should be of the most absorbing interest to everybody. Don't you agree, Miss Joan?"

"I certainly like to hear about the actions of the police if there is a real story behind it," answered Joan promptly. "But all this talk about arresting clues is just nonsense, and not a bit interesting, really. You know you're just trying to be sarcastic and funny, and I don't think you're at all nice." Her ready smile robbed her remarks of any too pointed sting, but nevertheless Mr. Tyson frowned slightly. He was of the opinion that his skilful, humorous baiting of the corporal was deserving of applause rather than censure. "Anyhow," continued Joan, "I don't think it's fair to the corporal to force this shop-talk on him when he's off duty." She smiled at Williams, who looked at her gratefully.

"Just as you say, of course, Miss Joan," said Tyson with a somewhat forced smile. The friendly exchange of glances between Joan and the corporal was not at all to his taste. "Seeing you are the ruling queen around here, and we merely your humble subjects, your wish is our law. By the way, I must tell you something funny which happened down at the mills to-day . . ." And he immediately plunged into one of his anecdotes, and this was followed by several others.

Even Williams had to admit to himself that the anecdotes were amusing and well told. But the fact did not in any way add to his happiness. In fact, they only managed to increase his awkwardness and misery. He felt he was hopelessly outclassed by the glib master of small talk. He considered his evening hopelessly ruined, and his one desire now was to get away. But he sat on for a while to avoid the appearance of having been routed by his rival.

Half an hour later he felt he could stand no more of it. Tyson was still holding the floor to the exclusion of everybody else. He looked at his watch, forced an exclamation of surprise, and rose.

"I didn't realize it was so late," he explained to Joan. "I'm awfully sorry, but I must be going. I have an appointment at ten o'clock," he lied glibly.

"Oh, but you must stay and have a cup of tea or coffee," protested Joan.

"I'm very sorry, but I really can't. Duty calls," he added as he held out his hand to her with a smile.

"Going to have a look round for those naughty smugglers who've been filling this burg with cheer and good fellowship lately?" asked Tyson. "I hear Inspector Weston is getting quite concerned about it."

"I don't think he's losing any sleep over it exactly," answered Williams indifferently. "At least he seems to bear up under the strain with credit. No, I don't think the smuggling is worrying him much. The smugglers are sure to run into a snag some day. They always do if you give them enough rope."

"Better let your Mr. Sherlock have a go at them," jabbed Tyson. "I'm sure he would be able to clear up that business in no time."

But Williams pointedly ignored him. He shook hands with Joan, nodded to Roy and Tyson, and walked out.

He cursed gently to himself as he walked towards the barracks. Nearly every time he went over to pay Joan Bancroft a visit, that squirt of a Tyson had to turn up. And as soon as he arrived he managed to make things unpleasant—at least as far as Williams was concerned. Always those taunts and sneers at the police, like to-night. And Williams felt with some chagrin that Tyson generally had the better of him. In fact, he was convinced that he cut a rather sorry figure. He was not even a fair exponent of the subtle art of repartee. Williams liked straightforward, artless language. Man to man he would soon have shut Tyson up effectually. But with a lady present he could not take recourse to direct action. Anything even remotely resembling a brawl had to be avoided at

all costs, and the fact rather handicapped Williams. Curse the fellow!

The few times Williams had managed to have Joan to himself they had always got on excellently. They had talked about the North, and kindred subjects of mutual interest. She had drawn him out to tell about his adventures up in the wilderness on long patrols, and he was able to find his tongue then. He gave quite fluent accounts of canoe trips along rivers and lakes, and about tussles with roaring, treacherous rapids. He also told her about weeks-long treks with dog-trains in the freezing winter, about battles, and struggles against blinding blizzards when the ultimate issue was often in doubt, and she always seemed to take an almost breathless interest in his stories.

But as soon as Tyson turned up he managed to appropriate the whole of the conversation with his easy and ever-ready tongue, and he, Williams, had to retire into his shell. All he could do was to sit and squirm uncomfortably in a chair, like a dumb-bell. He felt quite certain that Joan considered him an awful chump!

Williams sighed deeply. He loved Joan Bancroft, but he was sorely afraid that he was leading a forlorn hope. In the first place, what had he got to offer her? Nothing, he decided candidly after earnest reflections. He had hardly a cent in the world apart from his pay, and his future prospects were not particularly rosy. He might be promoted to sergeant some time, but even that was not a particularly brilliant position to ask any girl to share, and especially not a girl like Joan Bancroft. The best was not too good for her. And as far as attaining commissioned rank went—well, that prospect was too far removed to come within the scope of practical argument.

No, he was certainly not much of an egg, decided Williams ruefully. Particularly not in comparison to

Tyson, who was evidently well to do. Further, he was polished and well turned out, and had the added gift of being an accomplished conversationalist. And these were the sort of things that would appeal to a girl. At least, this was Williams's firm conviction.

These were all old arguments. He had covered that field over and over again in the past, and he had always come to the dismal conclusion that he had not a chance in the world. So it would probably be better for his peace of mind if he stayed away from Joan Bancroft altogether.

But in spite of all his sound arguments, he kept on flitting around like the proverbial moth, though after each visit he came away more convinced than ever that his case was entirely hopeless. So it was a rather glum corporal who tramped along the sidewalks of the darkened town on his way to the barracks.

Perhaps he would have been transformed to a more cheerful frame of mind if he had possessed a sixth sense, and could have heard part of the conversation in the Bancroft bungalow after his departure.

Scarcely had the door closed on the corporal when Joan turned to Tyson and said with some asperity:

"I think you were rather horrid to Corporal Williams. There was absolutely no reason for you to be so sarcastic and rude to him."

"But, my dear Miss Joan," protested Tyson, "you know I was only joking. Anyhow, these policemen always rub me the wrong way. They irritate me by their glaring conceit and superior self-confidence. They have too high an opinion of themselves, and need to be taken down a few pegs occasionally."

"I don't agree with you at all," declared Joan firmly. "I have found them all very modest, and not a bit stuck up in any way. So far I have not heard one of them brag, and I've known most of the Mounties who have been stationed here."

"That's only their subtlety," retorted Tyson with a smile which was almost a sneer. "They only pose as modest, simple lads to make a good impression. But at heart they are a bunch of overbearing, swaggering nincompoops, who think they are the cream of the universe. The whole corps is always trying to impress on the world how confoundedly clever they are."

"Nothing of the sort. I don't know why you have so much against the police, but I'm quite certain that you're quite wrong in your estimation of them. Corporal Williams, for instance, is a very nice, quiet boy, and a thorough gentleman. And he also happens to be a friend of mine, and I don't like any friend of mine to be insulted in my house," said Joan with grave, firm finality.

"Oh, I say. I'm sorry you're feeling that way about it," said Tyson, a little crestfallen at this direct rebuke. "I had no intention to insult the corporal. I was merely pulling his leg. And I thought he was big enough to take a little teasing without feeling hurt. But since you don't approve, I shall certainly spare his supersensitive feelings in the future."

"There you go again," reproved Joan. "You simply can't avoid being sarcastic. At least you ought to stop being funny at the expense of somebody else's feelings. It's such a cheap form of humour."

Tyson saw that she was genuinely annoyed, and decided to change his tactics.

"I'm awfully sorry that I should have annoyed you," he said earnestly. "You ought to know that annoying you would be the last thing in the world I would do intentionally."

He shifted his position in the chair, and bent slightly towards Joan. But the movement brought Roy within his range of vision. He had forgotten all about that young man. The latter had not taken any part in the conversation

all evening. He had been sitting curled up in a chair under a shaded lamp in one corner of the room, smoking and reading, so it was not particularly surprising that Tyson had lost sight of his presence. But now it was brought home to him, he decided on the spot that it was a nuisance which must be removed forthwith.

"Oh, I say, Roy," he called, "I forgot to tell you. On my way up here I met Joe Baines. He was looking for you. He wanted you to come down to the pool-room for a game of billiards. I promised to send you along if I found you here."

"That so?" inquired Roy without much interest. "Well, he can go on looking."

"That's not the right way to treat a friend, Roy," said Tyson reproachfully. "Joe was counting on you to get a game, so it's not right of you to disappoint him. You'd better go along and join him."

"I guess Joe'll find plenty of partners down at the pool-room, so I don't think he'll pull any sob-stuff if I don't turn up," answered Roy. "Anyhow, I'm not keen on going out to-night. I've got interested in this book, and I'm going to stick to it." And to prove that his decision was final, he resumed his reading.

Tyson bit his lip in annoyance. He couldn't very well order Roy out of his own home. Nor could he give him any broader hint: that would look far too pointed. So he decided that matters had to remain at their present unsatisfactory state. But he would certainly give Roy a piece of his mind on the morrow when he got him alone. He had lately discovered a tendency in his employee to be a little too independent, and that tendency had to be nipped in the bud. He was certainly going to show Roy his proper place.

But to-night he had to make the best out of the situation as it was, though it had been rather badly damaged by that stubborn young fool in the corner.

CHAPTER III

PLANS AND PREPARATIONS

WHEN Corporal Williams entered the barrack-room, he found Sergeant Ware there chatting with Constables Wentworth and Wrenn. Sergeant Ware was in plain clothes. He was a medium-sized, slim but well-built man with a pair of keen, intelligent eyes.

"Hullo, Sergeant," greeted the corporal. "How are you getting on?"

"Oh, so-so," grunted Ware. "I'm jogging along. I'll admit there's a lot of fog hanging about, but I hope it will lift some day. Anyhow, I've begun to concentrate my attention on a certain member of your delightful community."

"And who's he?" asked Williams greedily.

"Ah-h-h. That's my own little secret just for the time being," grinned the sergeant. "I may be barking up the wrong tree entirely; and I'm not going to give you chaps a chance of giving me the merry 'Ha-ha!' in case I'm wrong."

"How did you get a line on that fellow, Sergeant?" asked Constable Wrenn eagerly. His secret ambition was to become a member of the detective staff some day.

"Oh, well. Just keeping my eyes and ears open, and putting two and two together, and that sort of thing," was the somewhat vague answer. "And besides, I've got a rather keen nose, and have developed a sort of instinct for sniffing out blackguards."

Wrenn felt disappointed and looked it. He had hoped for an instructional lecture on the art of detecting, but evidently his budding hope was to be blasted.

"Well, I hope you'll catch these fellows soon," interposed Corporal Williams. "Only for the reputation of the Force. I met a fellow to-night who wasn't admiring you wildly."

"That's his loss, I should say," grinned the sergeant. "And who was he?"

"Fellow called Tyson. A nasty bit of work," answered Williams succinctly.

"Oh, the real-estate fellow. And which of my many glaring faults seemed to annoy Mr. Tyson particularly?"

"He wasn't exactly personal," admitted Williams. "He was only sneering and being sarcastic in a general way, so to speak. Called you Mr. Sherlock and that sort of rot. Rather conveyed the impression that he considered you and the whole bunch of us a pack of fools."

"Well, you can't expect everybody to admire our many outstanding charms," laughed Ware. "But we may be able to surprise Mr. Tyson one of these bright days."

"You don't suspect him by any chance?" asked Williams eagerly and hopefully.

"To tell you the truth, there's hardly a soul in this burg I don't suspect," parried Ware. "I'm going to sift the whole bunch carefully, right to the bottom, or at least until I hit the right party. That's all I'm going to tell you right now. I'm holding a pretty wobbly, bob-tailed straight, and I'm not going to tip off my hand before it's filled."

"And I hope that Tyson guy will fill it, blast him!" growled Williams viciously.

"You seem to love that fellow," suggested Ware.

"I do. I love him so much that nothing would give me greater pleasure than seeing him behind the bars. Stuck-up, silly ass!" ended Williams with intense feeling.

"Well, we all have our likes and dislikes," observed Ware philosophically. He had heard enough from the other members of the detachment to be quite aware of the reason for the corporal's grievance against the real-estate man, so he tactfully refrained from making any further comments.

"Say, Sergeant," resumed the ambitious Wrenn his researches into the realm of detection, "what makes you so certain that you'll find that bunch here in town? They might easily have cleared out, you know."

"On the contrary. I'm fairly confident that at least one of them is still right amongst us."

"How do you know? People are always coming and going in this burg," persisted Wrenn. "Somebody might easily have pulled that job and then cleared out."

"Now listen carefully, son, and I'll let you have one wee peep at my hand," grinned the detective. "This business was very carefully planned and prepared as you know. That shows that there is at least one man with brains behind it. Point one. At least one of the culprits must have been rather intimate with Mitchell, or else the latter would not have opened the doors. That proves that whoever he was he must have lived in this town for some time. Point two. The man Mitchell knew must have belonged to the more respectable section of the local community, or else Mitchell would hardly have taken any chances. Point three. One or more of the intruders must have been fairly familiar with the bank safe, and must have seen it open often. The fact that just the right amount of explosives was placed in exactly the right spot indicates that. Point four."

"Now, adding points one to four together, we can safely assume that the brains behind the whole business must belong to a man who's lived in this town for some time, that he belongs to the so-called respectable circle of citizens, and that he must have had business dealings with

the bank. And as nobody in that category is missing from town, we can safely assume that he's still here."

"Well, I guess so. But even if you're right, I can't see how this knowledge helps you much," said Wrenn dubiously. "Seems to me that one of the bank fellows could easily have done it."

"That idea suggested itself to me," admitted Ware. "But I've given all the officials in the bank the once over, and nobody seems quite to fill the bill. Though I can't say I've dropped all suspicion in that direction. I still keep an open mind. If my present line of investigation proves a frost, I shall have to turn somewhere else, and I may turn a wary eye towards the lads in the bank."

"But what makes you so certain that there were more than one man?" continued the voracious Wrenn. "Seems to me one fellow could have managed that job."

"My dear fellow, I thought you had grasped that fact long ago," remarked Sergeant Ware a little wearily. "You know Mitchell was held when he was killed. And you ought to know that it would be impossible for one man to hold another fellow and deliver those savage blows at the same time. Besides, there's that fellow who delivered the booze to the Russians. Though he might, of course, have been the leader dressed up for the part. But apart from that, there's the fact that the safe was blown open by an expert in such matters. Now, a professional, efficient safe-cracker would hardly live for any length of time in a two-by-four town like this, where his talents would be more or less wasted, as it were. He would hang out in one of the big cities where safes are numerous. And there's another point. Your professional safe-cracker is not exactly the type to be accepted into respectable society. They're mostly tough guys. There may be exceptions, but I doubt it. No, I'm quite convinced that there were at least two persons. My own theory is

that there were two, the organizer of the scheme, and one imported talent in the safe-cracking line. The latter I suspect is a Winnipeg crook, seeing that's the nearest city. I rather expect the cracksman scurried back to his home town as soon as the job was done. I've communicated with the detective staff at Winnipeg, asking them to check up on all the cracksmen down there, and to try and find out for me if any of them was absent from the city around the time of the outrage up here. They may be able to find out a few things, and then again they may not. However, I'm rather hoping for the best."

Wrenn turned the detective's words over in his mind for a few moments.

"I guess you've doped it out pretty well, Sergeant," he remarked presently. "It all seems to hang together. But even so I can't see where you've got any opening. Why can't you tell us something of this suspect of yours, and how you came to hit on him?"

"No. I've shown you nearly my whole hand as it is," laughed Sergeant Ware. "And it may be a punk hand at that. You never know. I may be taking too much for granted. So I'm not going to commit myself any further. Go ahead and do a bit of thinking for yourself. A little brain-exercise will do you good." He rose to his feet as he spoke. "I'm going over to the pool-room to have a talk with the lads over there," he announced.

"I'll come along with you," suggested Williams.

"No, I'm going alone," smiled the sergeant. "Much as I like your company, your presence would only cramp my style. You see, it's this way. Every fellow knows who and what I am; but my mufti has a reassuring influence on them, so they speak quite freely with me. If you were along, your uniform would be a constant reminder to them that they were speaking to a policeman, and they would become correspondingly close-mouthed.

So I'm far better alone. By the way, I may have to burgle a house one of these fine nights," he announced suddenly. enjoying the three pairs of startled eyes turned his way.

"Burgle a house?" repeated Corporal Williams a little stupidly. "What for?"

"Oh, just because," answered Ware lightly.

For a few moments Williams could only stare at the sergeant, but suddenly his face relaxed in a grin.

"Of course you're only pulling our legs," he said. "What's the catch? I'll bite."

"There's no catch in it. I'm quite serious," answered Ware.

"Whose house do you intend to burgle?" asked Williams, not yet quite convinced that the sergeant was in earnest.

"The residence of the fellow I'm interested in. I want to see if I can find any evidence in there."

"Why don't you apply for a search warrant?"

"I'm afraid I haven't sufficient evidence against him to apply for a warrant. In fact, I'm darn sure I haven't. I've got nothing but a nasty suspicion, and that would hardly be enough for your local magistrate. So I'm afraid a small burglary is indicated."

"Darn risky business," commented Williams dubiously.

"I know. But you have to take a few risks in our line if you want to get results."

"Yes, I know. But burglary. . . . It would be one hell of a note if we have to shove you into one of our cells as a burglar, in case you get caught."

"It would be a bit awkward, but that is all in the day's work," grinned Ware. "At least I'll promise to be discreet. An experience of this sort is not exactly a novelty. Well, good night all"

"Here, wait a minute, Sergeant," called the corporal. "When is this burglary of yours coming off?"

"I don't know yet. I have to get much better acquainted with my friend's habits before I pull off my little job. By-by." And he was gone.

No sooner had the door closed behind him than Constable Wrenn turned to the corporal.

"Do you think the sergeant was in earnest about that burglary?"

Williams shrugged his shoulders.

"I shouldn't be surprised if he was," he answered. "I've been told that Sergeant Ware never shies at anything when he first gets going. That's the reason he generally gets results."

"Gosh. I don't think this detective work is all it's cracked up to be after all," mused Wrenn aloud. "They seem to have to take a lot of chances. What will happen to the sergeant if he gets caught?"

"Oh, I suppose our people will get him out of it somehow; but it will be darned awkward, all the same. But that's his funeral. Come on, you fellows, I'll take you on at a game of penny ante. I need some money to tide me over till pay-day."

"Suits me," agreed Curly Wentworth with alacrity. "Though I'm afraid you'll be more in need of money than ever after I'm through with you."

"Hey, Curly, leave some of his cash for me," cried Wrenn. "I'm dead broke and need a few simoleons. Come on, and I'll show you how poker should be played!"

The following morning as Inspector Weston and Corporal Williams were busily disposing of reports, vouchers, and other items of routine work, a short, but wiry-looking, swarthy half-breed marched unceremoniously into the holy of holies.

"Mornin', Wess. Mornin', Willy," he greeted affably, a broad grin on his face.

"Oh, hello, Angus old boy," cried the inspector, looking

up from his work with a pleased smile, while the corporal grinned his welcome.

The new-comer was Angus McKenzie, an old and trusted friend of the inspector, and a general favourite with the whole detachment. In the past he had rendered the inspector many valuable services in the line of work, besides having been the latter's companion and guide on several excursions into the backwoods. But now Angus's roving days were over. Some years previously he had married, and had settled down to the humdrum life of a store-keeper across the river, near the Indian Reserve.

"How goes?" continued Angus, drawing a chair up to the inspector's desk and seating himself. "You plenty busy?"

"A little. There always seems to be a pile of papers trickling into this office, which we have to attend to sometimes," smiled Weston.

"Sure. Plenty papers. Too dam' much, me think," snorted Angus, frowning with keen distaste at the litter of documents on Weston's desk. "It ain't like the ol' days no more. No more trips North hardly. You sittin' in this damn' office all the time, busy on dam' papers. We ain't had no fun since we go up to the Beaver Lake country to catch that murder fellow, Charley Crow. An' that now near three years ago." He shook his head and looked sorrowfully retrospective.

"Oh, well. I suppose that's the penalty of advancing years and growing responsibility," smiled Weston. "Losing a goodly slice of your personal liberty, I mean."

"I guess you right, Wess. But dam' tough luck all the same," observed Angus lugubriously.

"I suppose so. Though we both seem to be able to stand the strain with fortitude," laughed Weston. "Picked up any useful information about those smugglers yet?" he asked.

"Whatfor you think me leave my store in middle o'

mornin' to come all this way? " asked Angus sarcastically. " To see you an' Willy lookin' at dam' fool papers? 'Course I've news."

" Good! " exclaimed Weston, leaning alertly forward in his chair, while at his own desk across the office Corporal Williams became all ears. " Shoot ahead, Angus."

" Sure. I've had my two nephews, Jim an' Andrew, do some scoutin'. Them both smart, bright fellers, you bet. An' little by little they start suspect John Hunter, the teamster."

" John Hunter," repeated Weston in surprise. " I thought he was above being mixed up in booze-running."

" Nobody hardly above that in this town jus' now," remarked Angus. " Times ain't extra good, so if pay good mos' anybody'll do anything. Anyhow, they foun' Hunter heap friendly with fellers runnin' blin' pigs. So they watch him close."

" Las' night near midnight they hang 'roun' his barn, an' they see him take out his team an' drive into woods on one o' them ol' trails. They sneak after him careful, keepin' well hidden back in brush. By an' by, after they follow for 'bout three miles, he pull up by one o' them 'bandoned shacks. But for a while he jus' hang 'roun' outside doin' nothin'. The boys hear him walk up an' down in the dark, as if waitin' for somethin'. After fifteen, mebbe twenty minutes another fellow comes along. He come very careful. My nephews never know he there before they hear his voice. An' then they know who he was. Him French Micky."

" He would be in it somewhere," murmured Weston.

" Sure. Him dam' no-good," agreed Angus. " Anyhow," he continued his story, " Jim an' Andrew hear Micky call in low voice :

" ' You there, John? '

" ' Sure,' answer John. ' All O.K.? '

" ' Right as rain,' answer French Micky. ' Two o' "

the Mounties playin' pool at pool-room, an' two's at barracks.'

" ' Sure I wasn't followed? ' ask John.

" ' Quite sure. I watch good.'

" Jim an' Andrew push each other with elbow an' grin in dark. It would take dam' sight better man 'an French Micky to spot 'em if they not want to be seen. Then John speak again :

" ' All right, Micky. You go back down trail an' watch.' An' Micky grunt an' go off.

" Then John took a lantern from rig an' light it, an' went inside shack. Light came through many cracks an' so Andrew, who's best scout o' the two, wriggled up to shack to get peek inside to see what John doin'.

" John was diggin' in earth floor o' shack, an' by an' by his spade strike wood. Soon he's got down to trap-door locked with padlock. He took key from his pocket an' opened trap, an' under was big cache, big enough to hol' twenty—thirty cases, says Andrew. But jus' then only seven cases in cache. John take 'em all out, then lock trap again, an' shovel back earth on top. He dam' careful spread lot o' rubbish on top so nobody can see that somebody been diggin'.

" Then Andrew back away, afraid John spot him when he come out o' shack with lantern. By an' by John carry the cases out on rig, blow out lantern an' drive away. An' Jim an' Andrew come away too. But this mornin' early they go back out there to have a look at the place in daylight. They foun' five trails leadin' to different points on river from shack. River only mile or so away. Bet them smugglers a slick, wise bunch. I guess they never use same trail twice. Well, that's all the news."

" I should call that a whole lot," exclaimed Weston with eager satisfaction. " Your nephews have certainly done exceedingly well, and here is ten dollars for each of them," he continued, handing two ten-dollar bills to the proudly

grinning Angus. "Now when we know the location of their main cache we should be able to get a strangle-hold on that gang. And the more information we dig up against that gang the more I get strengthened in my conviction that it's organized by a man with brains. A touch of genius, that hiding their cache under a pile of dirt in an innocent-looking, old, dilapidated shack. Nobody would think of looking for a cache there, especially not since there are about a hundred similar shacks scattered around the bush near town. And then they seem to keep a well organized spy-service. Did you make a mental note of the fact, Corporal, that you're being shadowed? You had better mind your step, or your deeds and misdeeds will be laid bare," remarked Weston with a grin.

"I certainly heard the sad news, sir, that the stalkers are being stalked," grinned Williams. "A novel experience, which I can't say I'm wildly enthusiastic about."

"Oh, you'll get used to it in time. But keep quiet, both of you, for a while, while I think the situation over."

For some time Weston gazed thoughtfully out through the window beside his desk. Angus hauled a pipe and tobacco-pouch out of his pocket, and soon he was blowing dense clouds of smoke into the room. Over at his desk Corporal Williams had resumed his writing, at the same time, carrying on a fierce, snappy skirmish with a buzzing fly, which seemed determined to pre-empt the corporal's nose as a perch.

Presently Weston came out of his reverie, and he turned to Angus and asked for a detailed description of the location of the shack, its surroundings, as well as the location of the points where the five trails emerged on the bank of the river.

After everything had been described to his satisfaction, he shook his head a little impatiently.

"Deuced awkward with those five trails," he muttered.

"If there had been only one we could have placed an ambush for them down by the river. But as the heads of those trails are scattered along a frontage of more than two miles, that's out of the question. It's impossible for the handful of men I've got here to patrol all the trails. And it would be futile to patrol the river front by canoe. That would soon be spotted by our elusive friends. They seem to be strong on look-outs. So we shall have to trap them at their cache, somehow. Though I don't quite like the idea. There will be too many chances for them to break away and scatter. But as it is the only alternative left us, as far as I can see, we shall have to try it."

He frowned thoughtfully for a few minutes. But suddenly his face relaxed as he came to a decision.

"Come over here, Corporal, and listen carefully. I'm going to outline my plan to you."

Immediately Williams sprang up from his chair and hurried across to the inspector's desk.

"Did you hear Angus's description of the location of the shack and the positions on the river-bank of the heads of the trails?" asked Weston.

"I did, sir."

"And do you think you could find any of those trails on the river-side, and further find your way up to that shack at night?"

"I'm quite certain of it, sir," answered Williams confidently.

"Good. Now listen. I can only spare two of you for this job, so I'm going to send you and Constable Wrenn along. Seeing the other side is watching our movements with such loving care and attention, you'll have to trick them.

"Now, we know their cache is empty, so it's an almost foregone conclusion that they will bring in a fresh load of booze in the near future. So there's no time to be lost on setting our trap. Now, you and Wrenn will spread

the news around town that you are starting out on a patrol to-morrow morning for the North. But don't overdo the thing. Be quite natural about it so none of our friends smell a rat. They've evidently got very keen noses. You'll gather the necessary provisions for a three weeks' trip from the store, and stow them into your canoe.

"To-morrow morning early you and Wrenn will pull out and start up the river. Around noon you'll select some suitable, dense bluff on the river-bank, and you'll conceal yourselves and your canoe there for the rest of the day. But make quite sure that you're not observed. You may be followed, though it's hardly likely. Build your cooking fires well back in the bush, so the smoke can't be seen by anybody passing on the river. You don't want any curious-minded busybody to come nosing around.

"As soon as it's dark you'll launch your canoe and head cautiously down-stream. Be particularly careful when you pass this town. Hug the darkest shadows of the opposite bank closely. Pick up one of the trails down below, and cache your canoe in the brush. Then pack all your provisions up to some concealed spot near the shack. Of course you'll have to wait till daylight before you finally select your camp-site.

"When you've got that far, I'm afraid you'll be in for a dull, nasty time, which will try your patience not a little," continued Weston with a smile. "You'll have to keep uninterrupted, careful watch on the shack night and day, and especially at night. I hardly think the smugglers will bring in their load of booze during day-time; but some of the men might come prowling around, and we want to get the identity of as many members of that gang as we can. So in the day-time it will only be necessary for one of you to keep watch, while the other can sleep and take his ease generally. You can arrange the watches between you any way you like, as long as one of you is always keeping the shack under observation.

"But at night I want you both to be on guard. That will be the time when the smugglers will most likely turn up. You may have to wait for days, perhaps for weeks. But don't for a minute relax your vigilance! And don't go near the shack at all. I don't want you to leave any tell-tale tracks around. We know there are some half-breeds in that gang, and any of those lads would soon discover even the faint imprint of a moccasin if one of them should happen to come nosing around in daylight.

"When our friends eventually turn up, don't do anything rash. Let them settle and feel at ease, as it were, before you go into action. The most favourable moment for you to spring your surprise, I should imagine, would be when they're inside the shack, storing away their booze. When you finally act, flash your revolvers and spring as good a bluff as you can, so you manage to round up the lot of them. But, of course, I can't lay down any definite plan of action for you. You must do just what circumstances and the situation call for."

Weston paused and thought for a few moments, then he continued:

"Well, Corporal, I think that's all the instructions I can give you. Anything that's not quite clear? Or any point you want to discuss?"

"No, sir. Everything is quite clear, thanks."

"Good. Now run along and break the good news to Wrenn. And then go ahead with your preparations. And don't forget to advertise the fact discreetly that you're going out on a long patrol for the North."

"I won't forget, sir."

"And there is another point, Corporal. If we manage to round up the gang, we shall probably be well on our way to clear up that bank hold-up. Sergeant Ware tells me he's suspecting somebody, but he won't tell me who he is. He says it isn't fair to the person concerned, as he has very small foundations for his suspicions. But if we find

this suspect as a member of the smuggling gang, we shall have something definite to go on."

"Quite so, sir."

"Well, carry on, Corporal. Tell Constable Wentworth that he is to take over your duties at once."

"Very well, sir."

Williams about-turned smartly, and left the office on his mission of cheer to Constable Wrenn.

"Well, Angus, what do you think of my little scheme?" asked Weston, turning to his friend who had been sitting smoking in silence while Weston issued his instructions to the corporal.

"Soun's the goods, Wess," answered Angus promptly. "Guess that'll work if them lads careful. Me reckon you still got some brains left, 'spite o' all the dam' fool papers you writing all the time. But wouldn't it been fine, now, if me an' you could 'a' gone on that trip?" he added wistfully. "That sure would 'a' been fine bit o' all right."

"Yes, it would have been rather like the good old times," remarked Weston with a reminiscent smile. "But we have to get used to the idea that we are more or less back-numbers, and that we have to give the youngsters a chance."

"Guess you right," sighed Angus lugubriously. "But dam' bad luck all the same." And again he sighed, and peered down the stem of his pipe with a sad shake of his head.

CHAPTER IV

THE AMBUSH

CORPORAL WILLIAMS and Constable Wrenn, burrowing out in the dense spruce-forest, both agreed that Inspector Weston had made no idle prophecy when he postulated the belief that they would be in for a dull time. They were even willing to go one step further and admit freely that they were having a confoundedly uncomfortable time.

They had found their way to the vicinity of the smugglers' shack according to plan. They had established their camp in a hollow, about half a mile away from the cache, and at a safe distance from any of the trails used by the smugglers.

In the day-time they relieved each other with regular monotony every three hours at their sentry post, a dense clump of brush, from where they had a fair view of the shack and the small clearing in which it stood.

They had discarded their scarlet tunics, and were wearing their brown stable jackets. The latter blended better with the ground, while the vivid red would clash too flagrantly with their surroundings. It would certainly be discovered by a pair of sharp eyes, even if well concealed. And the tiniest patch of red visible through the green brush would be a danger signal, which would certainly not be ignored by the smugglers.

The one off duty would spend his time at their camp, eating and sleeping.

But at night there was no respite for any of them. Side by side they would lie in their cover, their ears strained for any suspicious sound, while their eyes tried to penetrate the darkness. Occasionally they would hear a rustle in the bush, and they would tense themselves expectantly, only to relax a few moments later at the realization that the rustle was caused by some four-legged, nightly prowler of the forest.

The hours seemed to snail along, and the autumnal nights were beginning to be sufficiently cold to chill them uncomfortably in spite of their well-buttoned reefer jackets.

Often the eyes of one or the other would blink and close drowsily, and his head would drop forward on his hands; but he would rally with a start before sleep quite got the upper hand, and then he would shake himself energetically awake.

It was a relief to both when after a hundred years or so the first grey of the dawn would begin to pervade the forest. That meant that one of them could return to camp, and could drive the chill out of his bones by hot coffee and bacon. As soon as he had then finished a hasty meal he would hurry back to relieve his comrade, and the tedious routine of a new day would begin.

Five days and nights passed in uneventful boredom. The two officers began to have the queer sensation that they had lived for years there in the forest, and that they were destined to live there for the rest of their days.

But on the sixth day something happened. During Corporal Williams's watch in the early afternoon, French Micky appeared in the clearing. Williams immediately froze to rigid immobility in his cover, and for once he was supremely thankful that the time for his relief was still an hour off. A moving man amongst the trees just then, even if he moved ever so circumspectly, might easily have caught the alert Micky's keen eyes, and that would mean utter ruin of their plans.

French Micky slowly circled the clearing, his eyes searching the ground, and the watching Williams was thankful that they had followed Inspector Weston's advice to the letter, and had kept strictly away from the clearing. He knew Micky as a keen tracker who could easily pick out a comparatively fresh moccasin track, even if it was several days old.

But apparently Micky was satisfied with the appearance of the clearing, for presently he opened the creaking door of the ramshackle shack and entered. He only remained inside for a few moments. Probably he only wanted to satisfy himself that nothing had been disturbed inside.

When he had once more emerged in the open, French Micky shut the door, and then he peered keenly and searchingly into the surrounding bush. Williams held his breath and pressed himself still closer to the ground. He prayed fervently that the brush would prove to be sufficient concealment. It evidently was, for after a few minutes French Micky turned and walked rapidly down the trail leading to town.

When Constable Wrenn turned up to relieve Williams, they discussed the incident in excited whispers. They both agreed that French Micky's visit must portend the arrival of a fresh consignment of booze in the near future. Probably the smugglers would turn up some time during the following night.

The boredom of the preceding five days and nights was promptly forgotten, and keen anticipation and excitement had taken its place. They both impatiently waited for the coming of darkness.

That night neither of them experienced the slightest feeling of drowsiness. They were both as alert as cats in a strange backyard. And never was there a night which had been so filled with strange noises. Constantly they heard the brush rustle, and they held their breath and

strained their ears. And again and again they seemed to hear light footsteps approaching the clearing, but they all proved to be false alarms. Hour after hour passed, with nothing but these vague, undefinable sounds to repay them for their vigil, and when dawn came they both had the bitter feeling that they had been cheated out of a sure promise.

"Done in the eye!" sighed Williams wearily, when the inky shadows in the forest had been dispelled by the grey of the budding day. "I wonder if that darn French Micky spotted me, after all?"

"Couldn't have," protested Wrenn. "He would have given some sign if he had."

"French Micky is more Indian than breed, and he wouldn't give himself away by the quiver of an eyelash even if he had discovered anything suspicious," observed Williams grumpily. "He may have spotted me, or perhaps your fire back in the bush."

"He couldn't have spotted my fire, because at the time he was around here the fire was out, and I was sleeping the sleep of the just," averred Wrenn. "And I can't see how he could possibly have discovered you, because I never see you when I come to relieve you before I'm right on top of you, though I know you're there."

"You aren't an Indian, my boy," answered the pessimistical Mr. Williams. "Something tells me we're out of luck. I suppose we might as well build a shack out here, and homestead this darn patch of forest. Looks as if we're going to spend the rest of our lives out here, anyhow. However, it's your turn to have breakfast first, so beat it for the dining-car. But see to it that you make it snappy. I'm fed up to the eyebrows, so I'm not in the mood to do much waiting with Christian patience and fortitude."

"Right-o, old lad. You watch the haunting beauty of dawn in the forest, and listen to the gay chirpings of the

birds, and time will pass quickly," counselled the grinning Wrenn. "Toodle-oo, old bird."

He began to back out from the cover, when he suddenly stopped and remarked with relish:

"Just think of it, Willy. In about fifteen minutes I shall be stuffing myself with crisp, hot bacon, and shall be pouring cup after cup of steaming coffee down my throat."

"Get out of here quick, before I get desperate and do something to you," growled the famished and disgusted Mr. Williams. "And may the Lord help you if you don't hurry back!"

"Old sore-head," retorted the happy Mr. Wrenn. "I thought you would rejoice with me in the good fortune soon to be mine. But seeing I was mistaken, I shall make myself scarce."

A few seconds later the scowling Williams had the ambush to himself and his dismal reflections. And it was not only the dissatisfactory aspect of the immediate situation which disturbed his peace of mind. The fact that each day he spent out there in the woods meant just so much absence from Joan Bancroft, had a goodly share in forming the heavy scowl which marred his features. With him away that accursed Tyson had the field all to himself, and the realization was gall and misery to the infatuated corporal.

No, Williams was not happy that morning.

The remainder of that day appeared to Williams, at least, to be the dullest and most monotonous one they had spent so far. He could not rid himself of the depressing premonition that their expedition was a complete washout. And when night came only his sense of duty kept him awake and watchful. He did not expect anything to happen.

The hours crawled along.

But suddenly Wrenn nudged his comrade's elbow

smartly. Williams raised his head and listened, and at once he forgot all his troubles. Somebody was certainly moving out there in the darkness somewhere, and this time it sounded distinctly like human footfalls. Nor was he disappointed. A few moments later he could hear the muffled, heavy tread of several pairs of moccasined feet on hard ground. And whoever came must be carrying heavy packs, or else the steps would have been much lighter.

Corporal Williams's former apathy fell away from him like a heavy cloak, and he tensed himself gleefully for the moment of action.

Nearer and nearer came the unseen procession out there in the dark. Soon they could hear the heavy breathing and occasional grunts from the approaching men. Once one of them passed a remark, but he was instantly ordered to shut up and be quiet by an authoritative voice which spoke in Cree. Williams thought there was something familiar in that voice. He tried to remember where he had heard it before; but though he racked his brains, the memory eluded him completely.

At last the smugglers entered the clearing, and a few moments later the door of the shack creaked open. The two officers could hear the smugglers enter, and the dull "Thuds!" as their packs were lowered to the ground. They expected any moment to hear the men commence digging the earth away from the trap-door, and that was their prearranged cue for stepping into the picture to make it more lively. But to their disappointment they heard the smugglers file out of the shack almost immediately.

Williams was again gripped by alarm. He had the appalling suspicion that he had let Opportunity slip from his grasp. The gang was clearing out, and he was left with nothing but a load of booze on his hands, which was of no earthly use to him just then.

But before this suspicion had taken firm root common

sense came to his aid, and he nodded his head. Of course, that was it. The smugglers had gone back to the river for a fresh load.

Again came a long spell of waiting, impatient waiting, and as the minutes dragged along Common Sense and Suspicion waged a snappy war in Williams's harassed mind.

But some twenty or thirty minutes later peace once more settled on the worried corporal. Footsteps could again be heard approaching the clearing from the direction of the river.

This time the smugglers closed the door behind them after they had entered the shack, and a moment later light filtering through the cracks in the old building showed them that a lantern had been lighted inside.

Soon they heard spades grating against the earth. Corporal Williams nudged Wrenn, and cautiously and warily they left their cover.

They paused for a moment at the fringe of the clearing to peer intently into the shadows, but they could see no movements of skulking men anywhere. Then they began to tip-toe cautiously and noiselessly towards the entrance of the shack. Step by step they advanced, praying that they would not step on a dry twig, which would snap under their feet and sound an alarm.

They had only a couple of more steps left to cover the distance to the door, when there was a sudden rush and flurry; and out of the darkness two forms flung themselves on them—two powerful arms entwining the body of each.

For a second utter surprise held the two officers passive; but the shock soon wore off, and a fierce struggle and wrestling ensued. But their unseen assailants refused to be shaken off. They clung to them like leeches.

The noise of the struggle must have penetrated to the inside of the shack, for suddenly the light went out, and men came rushing out of the door.

The frantic struggles of the two officers were utterly futile against such odds, and soon the two were lying side by side on the ground, their ankles trussed together, and their hands tied on their backs. A piece of rope was forced into the mouth of each as a gag, and they lay there in raging, fuming helplessness.

They heard the gang hurriedly re-enter the shack, and the sounds of strained breathing told them that the men were again resuming their loads. A few minutes later they came out of the shack, and soon their footsteps were getting rapidly fainter and fainter down the trail.

But one man was left to keep guard over them. They could dimly make out his shadowy form over by the door of the shack.

The minutes ticked away, and presently the two officers could hear the gang return. The members entered the shack hurriedly, and again the sounds of straining and panting told the two unwilling listeners that packs were being shouldered.

A few minutes later they were all filing out of the shack. Before they left they could hear one of them give some whispered instructions to the man on guard. The next minute they had all disappeared down the dark trail.

Again the two discomfited officers were left to their own reflections, which were about a hundred per cent. profanity. The guard remained standing motionless near the shack.

After what seemed hours to the unfortunate Williams and Wrenn, but which was probably only ten or fifteen minutes, the guard made a sudden movement towards Williams. He bent over the prostrate form, and Williams could feel a knife cutting through the bonds which held his wrists together. Having duly discharged this act of grace, the man straightened up, and they heard him disappear down the trail at a run.

Quickly Williams removed his gag, spat violently, and

uttered a few heart-felt curses. Then he began with frantic haste to untie the hard knots in the rope which encircled his ankles. After some fumbling he was free, and he turned to his companion in misery and removed his gag. This uncorked Wrenn's flow of reason and feast of soul, and he forthwith let it run free and wide.

"Shut up! And lie still!" panted the corporal, busy with the knots in the rope. "No time for cursing now. We have to hurry to our canoe!"

Soon the last rope dropped away from Wrenn, and they both started on a run down the trail which led towards the thicket where they had concealed their canoe. They tripped and stumbled over twigs and branches in their headlong rush, and several times they were sent sprawling to the ground. And these misfortunes did not tend to sweeten tempers which were already severely frayed.

They were two seething, sizzling volcanoes of rage by the time they had found their canoe, and had stumbled with it to the river's edge. For a while they stood listening intently, hoping they might hear the paddle splashes from the smugglers' canoes, and so get a pointer as to which direction to take; but not a sound rewarded their efforts.

They agreed that most likely the smugglers had fled down-stream, and in that direction they took up their pursuit. They strained their eyes for any thickening of the darkness which might mean the presence of canoes, but strained them in vain. At times they let their canoe drift along with the stream, while they listened for tell-tale splashes; but all was silent. The chase was really futile. The smugglers could hide both their canoes and themselves in any of the dense, deep shadows along any side of the river, and the two officers might pass within a yard of them without being aware of their presence. But unreasoning fury drove them on. They hoped that by some lucky fluke they should be able to discover their quarry.

Dawn found them miles down the river, and if the rosy tint of the growing day in the east took on a deeper hue, it was probably due to the language flowing from their lips. They knew now that their chase had been a howling, dismal failure.

When they had relieved some of the excessive pressure of their superheated rage, they decided that it would be utterly useless to push their investigations further. They had no idea whether the smugglers were ahead of them or behind them. And wherever they were, they would be well concealed by now.

So with scowling faces and tight set lips, they headed their canoe up-stream once more. But as they paddled along their eyes darted unceasingly from one bank of the river to the other. They still had a faint, very faint, lingering hope that they might yet discover some trace of the fugitives. Each time a canoe hove in sight their hopes rose, only to be dashed to the ground a few moments later by finding the canoe occupied by some perfectly respectable, harmless Indians or half-breeds.

Shortly after noon they arrived at the trail leading up to the smugglers' cache, weary, hungry, and disgusted. They hauled their canoe out of the water and left it on the bank while they started for the smugglers' shack. They hoped they might pick up some clues there as to the identity of the members of the gang.

But the shack yielded nothing useful. Everything had been removed, even the lantern and shovels. A scattered pile of earth, the half uncovered trap-door, a confused mass of moccasin tracks, and the square imprints of cases in the dust, was all that rewarded their scrutiny.

Sadly they left the shack, their last hope gone. Outside on the ground were still the ropes which had so recently imprisoned parts of their anatomy. On seeing them, a fit of rage swept over Wrenn. He directed a swift, hard kick at the nearest piece of rope. In his well-

meant effort the big toe of his right moccasined foot made violent contact with the ground, which caused the frantic victim to howl down the wrath of all the Powers in heaven and hell on the whole world in general.

Finally the disgusted pair arrived at their own camp. They cooked and ate a meal in oppressive, funereal silence. After the meal was over they made packs out of their belongings, shouldered them, and dismally they plodded through the forest down to their canoe. Glumly they launched the latter, stowed their bundles into it, and climbed in. Then they pushed off and turned the nose of their craft towards home, looking about as happy as a couple of early Christian martyrs listening to the lusty roars of the lions in the near distance. They dreaded the welcome that awaited them. They knew no flags would be flying, and no trumpets blaring when they had rendered their report.

It was Constable Wrenn who fitly summed up the situation in a growled mutter :

“ I’m disgusted and fed up right to my *blankety-blank* eyelashes! I don’t give a *blank* if this *blankety-blank* canoe upsets and I get drowned in this *blank* of a *blankety* river! It’ll take us years to live down this damn ghastly mess. I wish I was never born! ”

Corporal Williams said nothing, but he sighed his weary endorsement of Wrenn’s sentiments.

CHAPTER V

MR. TYSON RUNS INTO SNAGS

JOAN BANCROFT's thoughts had often strayed to Corporal Williams during his absence. She even confessed to herself that she missed him.

Of course he was rather quiet, she admitted to herself. And he was far from being an adept at small talk. But then he could speak well and interestingly on the subjects he knew and which lay close to his heart. And there was about him an air of honesty and solidity which filled her with a sense of confidence and security when he was around.

She wouldn't have been a woman if she had not been perfectly aware of the admiration both the corporal and Mr. Tyson felt for her. And being a young woman their attention and rivalry flattered her. And of course she couldn't help drawing comparisons between her two swains.

Mr. Tyson, of course, was the finished conversationalist and the man of the world, at least according to local standards. He was a rather shrewd observer, and he had the gift to turn even a trivial episode into an amusing anecdote. But his humour never seemed harmless. There was always a sting in it somewhere, directed towards some person. And the fact considerably marred the enjoyment she would otherwise have derived from his whimsical chatter.

And though Joan had laughed to scorn Roy's warning against Tyson, her amusement on that occasion had not been quite sincere. She actually felt vaguely distrustful against him, and was never quite at her ease when she was alone with him. He appeared so self-assertive and egotistical, his manner was to a degree overbearingly insinuating, and she seemed to detect something calculating and furtive back of his dark, bold eyes. She far preferred the solid reliability and the quiet devotion and deference of the corporal. That was the reason she missed the latter, and was rather sorry he had gone away.

But Mr. Tyson was very pleased with the state of things. He gave great praise to his good luck when he heard that the corporal had gone out on a long patrol. Not that Tyson considered the corporal as a serious rival. He was too conceited for that. But he felt that he was much better out of the way all the same. And when Roy Bancroft left a few days later on one of his periodical trips, Mr. Tyson felt that all was for the best in this best of all possible worlds.

But somehow he realized to his vexation that he had not quite struck the open road. Joan Bancroft never seemed to be at home when he called at the bungalow. She evidently had developed a sudden passion for visiting friends. It actually looked as if she deliberately tried to avoid him, and the idea piqued him not a little. It hurt his vanity. But pondering this vexatious problem in his mind, he found a reason which quite satisfied him. Joan's surprising behaviour was most probably the result of maidenly shyness and modesty. And this solution to his puzzling problem spurred him on in his determination to see Joan. He was fully determined and eager to break down her maidenly reserve.

And one afternoon he was successful. When he knocked at the door of the Bancroft bungalow, Joan's voice called: "Come in!"

With the feeling of a conquering victor he entered the sitting-room. He noticed with some satisfaction that Joan looked slightly confused and that a faint flush mounted to her cheeks when she discovered who was her visitor. These signs he interpreted in his own way, as bearing out his preconceived theory about Joan's reason for avoiding him.

"How do you do, Miss Joan," he greeted with an expansive smile, giving her hand a firm squeeze. "It seems an awfully long time since I last saw you."

"Oh, how do you do, Mr. Tyson. I didn't expect to see you this afternoon. I thought you were busy in your office," was Joan's somewhat reserved welcome. As she spoke she withdrew her hand from his warm clasp.

"There was nothing much to do in the office," explained Tyson, "so I thought I'd run along to see how you were. May I sit down for a few minutes?"

"Certainly. Though I have to leave soon. Mrs. Simpson has asked me down to her place for the evening."

"You seem to be on the go all the time these days," remarked Tyson as he took a chair near her. "One hardly ever finds you at home."

"Yes, I admit I've been away quite a lot lately," answered Joan. "My friends have been kind enough to ask me to visit them, so I shouldn't have to sit here alone. They've been very good to me, all of them."

"Quite! But that's no reason why you should neglect your other friends," remarked Tyson reproachfully. "I have called around almost daily, and invariably I've found the place robbed of its charming chatelaine."

"I'm sorry you should have your walks up here for nothing," said Joan. "But then I didn't know you were coming, you see."

"And if you had known, would you have stayed at home?" asked Tyson, looking searchingly into her face.

"Not if I'd had a previous engagement, of course," parried Joan. She did not at all like the drift of the conversation. In spite of Mr. Tyson's suave, smiling urbanity there was a certain tense grimness of purpose underlying his manner, which slightly perturbed her. She wished she could invent some excuse to slip away. But before she had time to form any excuse, Tyson had leant slightly forward in his chair, and had placed one hand on the arm-rest of her own.

"You know, Miss Joan, somehow I've formed the impression that you are trying to avoid me. Is that right?" he asked, his eyes bent gravely on her.

Joan shifted uneasily in her chair. She was beginning to feel seriously alarmed at the way the situation was developing. She didn't quite know how to handle it to keep it within safe bounds. She finally decided that the only way to relieve the increasing tenseness was to appear entirely unconcerned.

"Avoiding you?" she repeated with a light laugh. "Don't be absurd, Mr. Tyson. Why should I wish to avoid you?"

"That's what I've been asking myself. Why should you? Because you ought to know," said Tyson impressively, having decided on a bold stroke now he had the opportunity, "that I love you."

Joan drew still farther away from him, and held one hand warningly in front of her.

"Please, Mr. Tyson, don't," she begged. "I—I don't want to hear you speak like that."

But Tyson was fairly launched, and refused to be checked. He bent still farther towards her, and took her hand.

"Please listen, Joan," he said softly. "I love you, and I've loved you for a long time. So . . ."

But Joan snatched her hand free, and jumped to her feet. Her face was a little pale, but determined.

"I don't want to hear another word, Mr. Tyson!" she said firmly. "So please leave me alone."

"But why, Joan?" asked Tyson, getting up from his own chair and facing her squarely. "Why shouldn't I be allowed to say that I love you? You ought to know that I simply worship you."

"I told you I didn't want to hear another word on that subject, so please stop," commanded Joan, drawing herself up stiffly.

But Tyson's blood was up, and he was determined to force the issue. He had never found Joan so attractive as in her present defiant mood, and he was resolved to conquer.

"Oh, come, Joan, you know you don't mean that," he said with a confident smile. And before she could guess his purpose, he had made one quick step forward, had gathered her in his arms, and was covering her face with kisses.

For a moment surprise held Joan passive; but then she began to struggle fiercely, and at last wrenched herself out of his arms. She stepped away from him, her eyes flashing, her face aflame with fury.

"Oh, you brute!" she panted. "You low, cowardly brute! Go! Go away from here at once! I hate the sight of you. So go, and leave me!"

"But listen, Joan. Please listen to reason," pleaded Tyson. He was beginning to be afraid that he had been too impetuous, and had rushed matters too much.

"I don't want to listen to another word from you!" stormed Joan. "All I want is to be relieved of your presence."

"Oh, come, Joan, please forgive me," pleaded Tyson contritely. "I'll admit I lost my head just now, and didn't act as I should. But my excuse is that I love you so much."

"That's always the coward's excuse when he wants

to cover up his baseness: 'I lost my head,' " was Joan's stinging retort. "Now please go before you insult me any further."

"You know I didn't mean to insult you," answered Tyson. "And I'm sorry I lost my head. Can't you please forgive me, and say that you care for me just a little?"

Tyson tried to put all the humble supplication he was able to muster into his plea, though actually he was beginning to lose his temper.

"Care for you?" answered Joan with a scornful laugh. "I detest and despise you so much that I never want to see your face again. I only wish I were a man, so that I could give you the thrashing you deserve."

The contempt in her voice stung Tyson, and he was unable to keep his rising wrath in check any longer.

"I suppose it's that confounded nincompoop of a policeman who's turned your silly head," he snarled with an ugly sneer.

But Joan vouchsafed no answer to his taunt. She merely gave him a scornful look. Then she turned on her heel, walked into her bedroom, and locked the door behind her with a click of finality.

Immediately Tyson repented of his remark. He walked across the room and knocked at her door.

"Listen, Joan," he called. "I'm sorry I made that remark. I know I shouldn't have said what I did, but it just slipped out. For the moment I felt jealous, and didn't quite realize what I was saying. Won't you please come out so I can talk all this over with you? I promise you on my honour that I won't in any way annoy you."

"It would have been better if you had thought of your honour earlier," came Joan's voice from the other side of the door. "I'm not coming out of this room till you are gone. And remember that I don't want to see you again, nor do I ever want to speak to you!"

Mr. Tyson bit his lip in vexation and perplexity. He was forced to admit to himself that he had lost the first trick. He had taken too much for granted. He had always looked on Joan Bancroft as a mere chit of a girl from a small frontiers town, unsophisticated, and an easy conquest. And it was disconcerting to find that Joan was obviously a girl with the developed, independent mind of a woman. Evidently she could not be carried off her feet by a bold, determined rush. In fact, he had discovered to his chagrin that Joan's feet were firmly planted on the ground. And somehow this realization enhanced her in his opinion, and made her appear even more attractive and desirable. So he was firmly determined not to abandon the game, though the first encounter had ended so disastrously. By patience and perseverance he was still confident of ultimate victory. He was well aware of his own charms and accomplishments.

But his first move must be to try to extirpate the bad impression he had obviously created by his previous audacity. And he decided that his first move would be to display a properly contrite and repentant spirit.

"Very well, Joan," he told the firmly closed door, trying to make his voice as humble as possible. "I once more repeat that I'm extremely sorry for what happened, and I humbly apologize. And seeing you haven't got it in your heart to forgive me, I shall take myself off, and I shan't bother you any more since you seem to object to me so strongly."

He waited for a moment or two, hoping that his humility would soften Joan's heart, and that she would relent and come out. But no sound came from her room, and the door remained locked in his face.

At last, with an ugly scowl, he turned away. He picked up his hat and walked out of the house, cursing under his breath as he strode along to his office. He stepped

along briskly. He wanted to sit down and think the situation over, and decide on his next step.

But this was evidently not his lucky day. As soon as he had entered his office Mr. Crane, his right-hand confidential man, had some vexatious and disturbing matters of business to report.

Mr. Crane was a tall, wiry-looking man with a long, solemn face, adorned with thick-lensed glasses and a pointed beard. He had a high forehead crowned with sandy-coloured, thinning hair. He looked somewhat like a college professor or a professional man, so the town had unanimously dubbed him "Doc."

When Mr. Crane had finished his report Mr. Tyson burst into a fresh paroxysm of raging profanity, but this time loudly. It was some time before he was able to listen attentively and intelligently to certain suggestions Mr. Crane tried to make. But finally he returned to a reasonable state of mind, and soon the two were deep in an earnest discussion. For the moment all thoughts of his earlier annoyances that afternoon were pushed into the back of Mr. Tyson's mind.

A few days later Roy Bancroft returned from his business trip. He looked far from pleased with the world as he entered Mr. Tyson's office. Evidently his mission had fallen short of success, and Mr. Tyson's greeting bore out the impression.

"Hello, Roy. You certainly ran up against bad luck this trip."

"You're dam' shouting I did!" agreed Roy fervently as he dumped himself into a chair. "If I hadn't left those two fellows in hiding outside the cache we'd have been caught like rats in a trap by those dam' red-coats."

"A good thing for you that you followed my advice, or you would have been in a cell by now," commented Tyson. "You fellows would have been caught long ago if I hadn't done the thinking for you. I told you it looked

fairly fishy when none of the canoes coming down from the North seemed to have met the two Mounties on the river. But you were rather inclined to laugh at me when I suggested their trip might only be a ruse, and that they might be trying to set a trap for you and your outfit."

"How could I guess they'd smelt out the cache?" asked Roy surlily. "Our men have kept close watch on them all, and not one of them has ever been near that part of the woods."

"Well, they evidently knew all about it somehow. But thanks to me you were able to turn the tables on them. Now, I wonder how the devil they got wind of that cache?" mused Tyson. "Is it likely that one of our men squealed, you think?"

"I'm darn certain none of them did," answered Roy emphatically. "I know them all well, and there's not one of them who would move a finger to help the Mounties. Besides, what would they gain by it? Nothing. They'd only stand to lose a good thing. No, it's more likely the police set some of these accursed half-breeds and Indians across the river on our trail. There's that nosy Parker, Angus McKenzie, for instance. He's as thick as thieves with Inspector Weston. I shouldn't be surprised if he's somewhere behind this business, curse him!"

"But I thought you said you had Angus watched?"

"So I had. But that wouldn't prevent him from sending some friend or relative out scouting. They are as numerous as flies, and we can't watch them all."

"Perhaps you're right," agreed Tyson. "Probably they spotted one of our men, and trailed him to the cache. But how they could sneak past our own scouts beats me. It seems that French Micky and his pals aren't quite as smart as they think they are."

"They are dam' good men," protested Roy. "Don't you fool yourself about them. But when it's a question

of Indian against Indian the odds are even as to who's going to come out second best."

"Well, we'll leave it at that," remarked Tyson, sounding as if he was not quite convinced. "But it's a confounded nuisance, all the same. Sure the booze is quite safe in the new cache?"

"I sure am. We buried it in the ground about a couple of rods from an old trail leading in to one of those deserted lumber camps. Oh, it's quite safe all right. But how we're going to get it out with the police watching like lynx is more'n I can tell."

"Never mind about that. We'll get them out all right," said Tyson confidently. "I've still got a few tricks up my sleeve. But are you sure you covered your tracks so well that those confounded Mounties won't smell out the new cache?"

"You bet your sweet life they won't. We bamboozled them good and proper," answered Roy with a smile. "After we'd tied them up well and good, I left a man watching them while we hustled our stuff back down to the river. I told him to free the hands of one of them as soon as he was quite certain we'd got everything packed into our canoes. When he came rushing up we pushed off, and paddled down the river for a couple of miles. Then we pulled the whole outfit up on the bank and hid ourselves and everything else in the brush."

"About half an hour later we heard the Mounties coming down the river hell bent for election, though they stopped occasionally to listen for our paddle-splashes. I bet they were steaming some around their collars." And Roy's grin broadened at the recollection.

"However," he continued, "as soon as we had heard them pass, we judged it safe to move. We shifted our outfit quite a way back into the bush. But we had one man stick around the river's edge to be on the look-out for the Mounties. Late in the morning they came back up

the river, looking about as happy as a couple of trapped foxes. But we never made any move till well into the afternoon, though we felt pretty certain they'd given up the chase by then. Anyhow, we didn't see any sign of them after that.

"Well, as I said, in the afternoon we moved all the cases up to that place I told you about, and we dug a hole in the ground and buried them. We covered the whole place well with wind-falls and brush, so I don't think even the keenest tracker could find the spot, even if he knew in which locality to look. Which nobody does expect ourselves.

"As soon as darkness came we launched our canoes and pushed down the river. When we got to Round Lake I paid off the men. Red Morrison, the fellow who does our teaming at that end, drove me across country to Harrisville, where I caught a train. I made a roundabout trip almost to Winnipeg before I took train for home. So they'll have a hard time to pick up my trail. In fact, there's no trail to pick up either end. So everything is as safe as houses so far."

"Yes, it looks that way," commented Tyson. "But why didn't you leave those dam'd Mounties tied up till called for, or till they had managed to wriggle out of their bonds?"

"Because they'll be sizzling mad enough as it is," answered Roy shortly. "I didn't intend to make them more sore than I could help. I'll be in bad enough as it is, if they ever catch me, and are able to connect me up with that night's job."

"Yes, I bet you would be for it, and then some," grinned Tyson. "The Mounties will be howling for your blood if they catch you."

"You said it. And that's the reason why we'd better quit right here," said Roy glumly. "We've gone quite far enough as it is. The police have proved they're pretty

wise, and they're stayers at that. So they'll be sure to catch us one of these fine, bright days if we carry on."

"Oh, I say, Roy, I never thought you'd be a quitter," deprecated Tyson. "It would be worse than foolish to chuck up as good a thing as this just because of a small reverse. The police may be pretty wise, but we've got a few brains of our own. And I don't mind saying that they're good enough to beat the Mounties any day," he stated modestly. "And remember, we know who they are, and can keep an eye on them, while they have to grope around in the dark. All we've got to do is to change our tactics, and change our scouts and teamster around here. The police probably know by now who at least some of them are. I've even a scheme of using our old men as decoys. While the Mounties keep fond watch on them, it will keep them from looking in other directions. In fact, Crane and I have discussed matters, and we've made a few plans. We only waited for your return to make a final decision. We have to have your advice, as you know the country around here like a book."

"Well, I don't know. Your schemes may be pretty good, but it will take an all-fired hot scheme to fool the police in the long run," remarked Roy moodily. He was pulling his tobacco-pouch and pipe out of his pocket as he spoke. "After what we did to them, they'll be buzzing around like a band of Sioux Indians after our scalps."

Frowning reflectively, he began to stuff tobacco into his pipe.

"Snap out of it, Roy," counselled Tyson. "You've got a touch of the blues. That's what's wrong with you. You're over-estimating those Mounties. We slipped it neatly across them the other night, didn't we? Don't you worry. We'll slip it all over them in the future, too!"

"It's easy for you to talk," growled Roy, placing his tobacco-pouch on his knee while he groped around in his pockets for a match. "You're keeping well in the back-

ground. I'm the guy who'll have to stand the racket if anything goes wrong. And with this attack on the police mixed into it all, it doesn't look quite good enough for me to stay in."

"Hang it all, Roy! I didn't think you were the sort of fellow who'd sneak out of a thing first time something goes wrong," exclaimed Tyson scornfully. "We can't expect to have everything run smoothly all the time. But as long as I do the planning for this outfit, I'll guarantee that nothing goes very wrong! So I wouldn't worry if I were you. Besides, where do you think you could pick up another proposition that would pay as well as this? You know you aren't exactly flush. I still hold those notes of yours."

"I know all about that, so you needn't rub it in," muttered Roy. "Dam' that poker, anyway. I never seem to have any luck at all. It looks as if I'm just plain hoodooed, and never get a chance to get square."

"Oh, your luck will break sometime," remarked Tyson, suppressing a smile. He could have explained the reason for Roy's persistent bad luck if he had wanted to, but that was one little secret he hugged closely to his own breast. "You just stick to me, Roy," he continued, "and everything will come out right in the end, with a little nest-egg tucked away for each of us. We shall have to step easy for a time, till the police calm down a bit. And then we'll change our tactics, as I said before, get us a new crowd, and start all over again. I told you Crane and I had already roughly sketched a few schemes. Between the three of us we shall be able to cook up something really good. So just sit tight, and refuse to have yourself scared out of the game."

"Well, I guess I'll hear what you fellows have doped out before I decide either way," said Roy cautiously, puffing moodily at his pipe.

"You'll find it's swell dope all right," remarked Mr.

Tyson in slangy joviality. "Crane is out just now. We'll go into this business as soon as he returns. In the meantime there's another matter I want to talk over with you."

"Well, shoot right ahead."

"I proposed to your sister the other day," said Tyson.

"The hell you did!" exclaimed Roy, taking his pipe out of his mouth and staring at Tyson. "And what did she have to say to it?"

"Well, to be quite frank, she didn't seem to see things my way at all," admitted Tyson.

"No accounting for tastes," commented Roy, trying to hide his satisfaction by squinting down the stem of his pipe. Tyson was about the last man he would like to accept as a member of the family.

"I'll tell you what was the trouble," continued Tyson confidentially. "I'm afraid I was a little hasty and took your sister unawares. In fact, I have to confess that I rather lost my head and kissed her, and that got her back up."

"I should say it would get her back up, good and plenty!" declared Roy, frowning at Tyson. "Joan is not the sort of girl to let herself be kissed by the first fellow who comes along. I like your dam' nerve!"

"Oh, shut up! I told you I lost my head, and didn't exactly realize what I had done before it was all over. I love Joan, and I thought she cared for me. However, she grew quite huffy, and seemed to have got the idea into her head that I intended to insult her. Which is nonsense, of course. She knows just as well as I do that I wouldn't insult her for anything in the world. But the fact remains that she got offended with me, and refused to let me explain matters. In fact, she locked herself in her room, and told me she never wanted to see me again."

"Now, I don't think she meant half of what she said."

They were mostly words spoken in the heat of the moment. And I feel quite certain that I could put matters straight if I only got a chance to speak to her. But I can't very well force myself on her after what she said. That would only make matters worse. And that's why I want you to help me out. She thinks an awful lot of you, so you could easily square me with her. I mean, I want you to put in a good word for me. You know, tell her I'm not a bad sort of a fellow, and that I'm sorry about what happened, and that sort of thing. You see what I mean, don't you? "

"You want me to do your courting for you, is that it? " asked Roy sarcastically.

"Don't talk like an ass, Roy," retorted Tyson irritably, flushing a little. "All I want of you is that you square things with your sister. I'll do my own courting."

"I guess you'll have to, because I'm not going to mix in this at all," declared Roy firmly. "This is entirely Joan's own affair, and I've no intention of butting in. Besides, it would be useless. If she's made up her mind that she dislikes a person, wild horses couldn't make her change her mind. She's no dam' Sissie, I tell you. She's got a mind of her own, I'll tell the world. No, sir. You'll have to count me out of this! "

Tyson looked at Roy with a heavy scowl.

"I'm not going to count you out of it at all," he said.

"You're going to do exactly what I tell you. You seem to have forgotten that you're not exactly in the position to refuse."

"What do you mean? " snapped Roy.

"Well, there are those notes I hold. I could make it rather unpleasant for you if I pressed for payment."

"Say, now you are putting a scare into me," sneered Roy. "I could easily raise the hundred-and-fifty and some odd dollars any day on our property."

"Oh, you could, could you? " asked Tyson sarcastically.

"You seem to forget that it's joint property, and that your sister would have to give her consent before you could raise one cent on it. It would be rather easy for you to explain to her how you've managed to run into debt, wouldn't it?"

Roy frowned and blushed a little.

"Never you mind about that," he muttered defiantly. "I shall be able to fix that all right. So don't you fool yourself."

"Perhaps you'll be able to fix it. But even if you pay up those notes, I can still make it pretty hot for you," continued Tyson with a wicked smile. "Just a few words to the police, and you would be in the soup up to your neck, my lad!"

With an oath Roy sprang to his feet.

"You dirty skunk!" he snarled, his face convulsed with fury. "So that's your game? You threaten to squeal, do you, you dam' rat!"

"I'm not threatening. I'm only pointing out a few things to you which you seem to have forgotten," said Tyson, his face hard.

"And you seem to have forgotten a few things yourself, Mr. Smarty!" retorted Roy hotly. "If you carry any tales to the police about me, I have a little song of my own I can sing to them about you, you . . . !"

Tyson leaned back in his chair and laughed loudly and mockingly.

"Lord, Roy, you're even denser than I gave you credit for," he chortled. "Where's your evidence? How are you going to prove that I'm mixed up in this business? *You're* the fellow who's handled all the deals. I could bring a score of witnesses against you. But there's hardly a soul who knows that I've been mixed up in the smuggling at all. And the few who know would hardly testify against the fellow who handles the pay-roll. And even if you could produce proofs against me, the worst that

could happen to me would be a fine, and I can afford to pay that. But where would the price of your fine come from? You've managed to squander about all you've made on poker games, so you would be pretty well up against it without me to back you! And, besides, you seem to have forgotten entirely that little episode with the police out in the woods the other night. No fine could square you for that! It would mean a stretch behind the bars for you; and it would be pleasant for Joan to have her only brother in prison."

Roy spat out an ugly oath. He took a quick step forward and raised one fist threateningly towards Tyson.

"You keep her name out of this, you filthy hound!" he grated, "or I'll break every dam' bone in your dirty carcass!"

"Here, Roy, don't you try any of your rough-stuff on me," warned Tyson, picking up a heavy ruler from his desk, "or it'll be the worse for you! Now sit down and be sensible, and don't stand there roaring like a mad bull."

"I'm not going to sit down! I'm through! I'm through with you for good!" raved Roy. "Go ahead to the police and do your squealing! Do your worst! But don't let me catch up with you after, if you want to live! I always thought you were a pretty rotten guy, but you're a dam' sight worse skunk than I thought. You dam' filthy, double-crossing rat! I wouldn't have any more dealings with you if you were the last man on earth! So run your own dirty smuggling, and be dam'd to you!"

He picked up his hat from Tyson's desk, turned on his heel, and strode towards the door.

"Hey, Roy! Wait a minute!" called Tyson. "You've got me all wrong. I just . . ."

"You go to hell!" Roy flung back over his shoulder.

"And the sooner you go there, the better I shall be pleased! "

He covered the remainder of the distance to the door in a couple of long strides, jerked it open, passed through, and slammed it behind him with a bang which shook the room.

CHAPTER VI

ROY BANCROFT'S DECISION

No sooner had the door slammed behind Roy than Tyson jumped to his feet with an oath and grabbed his hat. He realized that for the second time within a few days he had been most unfortunate in dealing with members of the Bancroft family. He had not the slightest intention of reporting Roy to the police. His threat had been mere bluff, by which he hoped to bring Roy to terms. And he had no intention of infuriating the young hot-head. He couldn't afford to break with Roy. He was too valuable an ally for that. Tyson simply couldn't get on without him. So he must get hold of him at once and try to pacify him.

He hurried across the room to the door, cursing freely under his breath.

In the doorway he collided with Crane, who was just then entering the office.

"Hello!" exclaimed the latter in mild surprise. "What's all the excitement this morning? I just met young Bancroft hurrying out looking like a young thunderstorm, and now you come barging into me like an express train run amuck."

"I'll tell you later," answered Tyson hurriedly. "I'm in a hurry now. I have to catch up with that young fool."

He squeezed past Crane and hastened into the street.

The latter followed his employer's hurrying form with his eyes for a few moments, an amused grin on his face; then he turned round and entered the deserted office.

In the meantime Roy had done some rapid thinking. His burning rage had cooled down a little as soon as he got into the fresh air, and he began to realize that he had acted extremely foolishly. He had shown his hand to Tyson, which was the very last thing he had wanted to do. Ever since he had had that encounter with the police out at the secret cache he had decided that it was high time for him to get out of the game. He had actually made up his mind to follow Joan's advice, and go up into the backwoods for a season's trapping. He had intended to sneak out quietly and not tell a soul, except Joan, where he was going to locate his camp. But now he had spoilt everything.

Tyson was quite capable of going to the police and spilling the beans, reflected Roy ruefully. He was inclined to credit Tyson with being liable to perform any dirty trick like that. And if the police first got hold of him, he would be in the ditch for fair. Tyson had been quite right. He would have great difficulties in finding the money to pay any fine. And if the police connected him up with that assault against two of its members, which they were more than likely to do, it would mean good-bye to the open air for him for some time to come.

He cursed himself for being such an idiot. He should have been more diplomatic. But hearing that skunk trying to threaten him into coercing Joan to marry him had simply made him see red. Roy admitted frankly to himself that he was far from being an angel, but then he was inclined to look at Joan in that light. And he would fight hand and foot to prevent her from marrying any rotter like that rat Tyson. If she married at all, it should be to some decent, clean man who was worthy of her.

How he wished he hadn't lost his temper with Tyson. If he only had been given an opportunity to sneak away secretly, before Tyson grew suspicious and played the informer, he might stand a chance to square matters with the police without going to jail. After a season's steady trapping he would have enough money to be able to pay his fine for booze-smuggling. And, perhaps, by the time he returned to town in the spring the police might have quieted down to the extent that they wouldn't press the charge about the assault. Both Inspector Weston and Corporal Williams were square, decent fellows, who would not get a fellow deeper into trouble than they could help. And Joan was very friendly with the inspector and his wife, so perhaps she might be able to put in a good word for him. Anyhow, he felt quite certain in his own mind that things would turn out better if he only could slip away for a while.

He began to wonder if the best course for him now wouldn't be to swallow his pride, and go back to Tyson and pretend to patch up their difference. . . .

"Hey, Roy! Wait a minute!" a voice called behind him at this point in his meditations.

He turned and saw Tyson coming hurrying and puffing after him. He felt relieved. Now there would be no necessity of eating humble pie. But he hid his satisfaction well behind a mask of surliness.

"Well, what is it now?" he growled, when Tyson came panting up to him. Tyson was no trained athlete, and any form of violent exercise came hardly to him.

"You're a fine fellow, Roy, going up in the air like that for nothing," puffed Mr. Tyson reprovingly. "You know dam' well I was only bluffing when I threatened to squeal on you."

"That so?" observed Roy non-committally. "Well, that kind of bluff doesn't go very well with me. You seemed a bit too much in earnest for a bluff."

"Don't be silly, Roy. You ought to know me well enough by now to know I wouldn't do a dirty trick like that," continued Tyson reproachfully. "I really gave you credit for having enough sense to realize that."

Roy made a mental note that it would be greater credit to his sense to consider Tyson quite capable of carrying out his threat, but aloud he said:

"Well, I guess I lost my temper, and didn't do much thinking. But if there is one thing that gets my back up it's to hear anybody threatening to do the dirty on me."

"Oh, forget it, Roy," said Tyson jovially, patting Roy paternally on the back. "I guess we both got a bit hot, and said things we didn't mean. We are too good friends to fall out over a little squibble like this."

"Guess we both did steam a little," admitted Roy, forcing a smile. "But, as you say, there's no reason why we should fall out over it. Se let's forget it."

"That's the stuff," commended Tyson, beaming on the youngster. "What about coming straight back to the office and talk over those plans I mentioned? Crane came in just as I left."

Roy pulled out his watch and looked at it.

"Sorry, but I can't come now," he said. "It's near dinner-time, and there are a few things I have to do at home before dinner is ready. Didn't have time to attend to them after I got off the train this morning. What about getting together this afternoon, say at three?"

"That suits me. I'll tell Crane to be there," said Tyson readily.

"All right. I'll be there at three sharp. So-long."

They parted. Tyson returned to his office, while Roy continued his homeward course.

Between the centre of the town and that section where the Bancroft bungalow was situated a deep salient of forest was cutting into the town. Through this wedge of forest led a footpath, which formed a short cut, and which was

generally used by the Bancrofts and their neighbours in their trips to and from the shopping district of the small town, which embraced a couple of blocks or so on Main Street. But after dark the ladies, at least, preferred the longer route along the lighted streets which led around the patch of forest.

As Roy strode along the path through the spruces his plans gradually developed, and by the time he reached his home they were quite completed.

He burst into the kitchen where Joan was busy preparing dinner, and announced without preamble:

"Say, Sis, I've decided to take your advice and go out trapping straight away."

Joan looked up, a little startled at his impetuosity; then she smiled.

"That's splendid, Roy," she said. "I'm sure you will enjoy being out in the woods for a season. But what has made you change your mind so suddenly? You actually sound and look excited."

"I've had a set-to with that rat Tyson," said Roy viciously. "And I'm through with him for good and always. Amen. You know, that nasty piece of cheese told me you'd given him the cold shoulder, and then he asked me—me, if you please—to square up matters by putting in a good word for him with you! What do you think of that for nerve? I told him straight and plain that I wasn't going to do anything of the sort; and then we had a few words. And—well—that sort of finished me with him."

"And I'm glad," commented Joan quietly. "Mr. Tyson insulted me most unpardonably, and I don't want to see the man again," she explained, her face flushed with resentment. "I detest him most thoroughly, and I'm very pleased to hear that you are through with him."

"I sure am. Only he doesn't know it yet," said Roy with a boyish grin. "I sort of pretended to patch up the

quarrel with him later. I don't want him to know that I'm going before I'm well on my way, and even then I don't want him to know *where* I'm going."

"But why all this secrecy?" asked Joan, looking at him with surprise. "Why can't you just tell Mr. Tyson that you are leaving him, and then go your own way?"

"Well, you see, this fellow Tyson is a dirty tyke, who'd make trouble for anybody if he gets sore at him. That's why I want to slip out on the quiet."

"And what trouble could Mr. Tyson make for you?" asked Joan, looking searchingly at Roy. "Has he got some hold on you in any way?"

Roy squirmed a little under her gaze. Why was it women always had to get right to the bottom of things? he asked himself peevishly. Why couldn't Joan be satisfied with his sketchy explanation? But her eyes were fixed inquiringly on him, so he had to give some sort of answer.

"Well, you see, Sis," he began hesitatingly, praying for an inspiration, "it's like this. . . . You see, I . . . Well, I owe Tyson some money," he plunged recklessly. The inspiration had arrived, and he only hoped his extemporaneous effort would sound convincing enough to stick. "Quite a lot of money, in fact. And if Tyson got to know that I intended to pull out, he might get ugly to prevent my going. You see how it is?" he asked, looking a little anxiously at Joan.

"But I don't quite understand," said Joan. "How have you come to owe Mr. Tyson money?"

"It's all over some real estate deals. You see, some deals didn't quite break the way we expected, so I got rather into a hole," explained Roy, gaining more confidence as his story took firmer shape in his mind. "You always have to take quite a few risks in that sort of business. I guess I was a little too reckless, perhaps. But it's too late to mend that now. But if I get away and get a fair run of luck trapping, I shall be able to square up everything

in the spring. Now you know exactly how I'm fixed. So you can see for yourself that I have to step carefully. And I want you to help me get away on the q.t. You'll give me a hand, won't you, Sis?"

"Of course I will. What do you want me to do?"

"Well, you know it would be no good to go down to one of the stores here and buy my outfit. It would be all over this small wart of a town in half an hour that I was about to pull stakes. So I want you to take my canoe after we've eaten, and pretend you're going out for a paddle. Pull across to the reserve, and buy my outfit from Angus McKenzie. He thinks a lot of you, and he'll keep everything under his own hat if you ask him to. I guess he'd do most anything you asked him to do. I'll give you a list of what I want. I don't really want a lot of grub, as there will be lots of partridges and ptarmigans where I intend to locate. There'll also be moose and caribou. Anyhow, I'll put down on my list what I want. Leave the list and my canoe with Angus, and slip quietly back yourself by the railway trestle. Later this afternoon I'll sneak across and start from Angus's place."

"But where are you going, Roy?" asked Joan.

"I'm going up into the Swan Lake country. I know it's a good fur country. And very few trappers ever go in there, so I'll not be liable to be bothered by anybody. And I know of an abandoned camp up there. It's got quite a good cabin, which can be made fine and dandy with a few repairs. There's even a cooking-stove in it. It'll suit me quite as well as if it had been made to order. But don't tell a soul where I'm going. Not a single soul! If you first tell one it'll soon be all over town."

"Of course I won't tell when you don't want me to," said Joan, looking a little thoughtful. "But I don't like all this secrecy. It looks too much as if you were running away from something." She took a quick step towards him, placed her hands on his shoulders, and looked

searchingly into his face. "Have you really told me the whole truth, Roy?" she asked earnestly. "Are you quite sure you aren't keeping something back?"

By a supreme effort of will Roy succeeded in meeting those grave, searching eyes squarely.

"Of course I've told you everything, Sis!" he cried a little impatiently. "I wish you'd trust a fellow a little. I haven't got any other troubles but this set-to with Tyson. But I tell you, that trouble will be serious enough if that fellow gets on my trail. He's skunk enough to do anything that's dirty. He might even swear out a warrant against me for absconding or something pleasant like that, and set the police on my track. A fellow like that is liable to do anything. So remember, not a word to a soul, not a single soul!"

"All right," agreed Joan, releasing him and walking back to the stove. "You go ahead and make out your list, and I shall take the canoe across to Angus and fix up everything with him. Hurry up. Dinner is soon ready."

"Right you are."

Roy had opened the door and was on the point of passing through, when he stopped. He had just remembered something.

"Oh, listen, Sis," he called. "I'm going to pack my kit in a gunny-sack, and you take that along with you please. It won't be heavy. If you meet any curious person just tell him that you are taking some old clothes across to some of the poor people at the reserve. Do you mind?"

"Not at all. Just hurry along and get that list made up and your kit packed."

"Thanks, Sis. And there are some traps hanging down in our canoe-shed. They are all quite serviceable, so please drop them in the canoe."

"Very well. I'll attend to it all."

"Thanks awfully, Sis. You're a brick. Well, I'll go

along and fix up the list and my kit." And Roy left the kitchen.

There was a thoughtful frown on Joan's face when she once more bent over the cooking-range. She was not quite satisfied in her own mind that Roy had told the whole truth. She reproved herself for being distrustful and disloyal; but the suspicion persisted, that Roy was mixed up in a far more serious affair than he had admitted, and that he was actually running away from very serious consequences. She knew how reckless he was, and how easily he could be persuaded to join in any affair which appealed to his thirst for adventure. She fervently prayed that she was wrong, but the doubt lingered and pressed a sigh from her. But whatever had happened, she told herself firmly, she was ready to do anything and to sacrifice everything to help Roy.

Roy appeared punctually at the appointed hour in Tyson's office. Both the latter and Mr. Crane were there.

The three at once began to discuss ways and means to divert a steady stream of booze into Portage Bend.

The first step would be to get rid of their old corps of assistants. They felt confident, in view of recent events, that by now the police would know the identity of at least a few of the men they had employed. Possibly the police would arrest those known to them, and that would leave Tyson & Co. free to re-engage those who were not suspects. But before the police showed their hand they would have to get rid of them all. Tyson postulated the opinion that Roy would easily be able to pick up a fresh crowd of helpers, and Roy agreed. The latter was willing and eager to agree to everything, as long as they could get the meeting over in a hurry, so that he could get started.

The second step would be to change their tactics completely. Bringing their stuff up by canoes from Round Lake would be impossible from now on. The police would certainly lay traps for them somewhere along

the river, so sooner or later they would be caught. The scheme Tyson and Crane had agreed on after long deliberations as the one most likely to succeed would be to freight the stuff through the woods well to the west of the town, say some ten or twelve miles, and bring it up to some point of the river up to the north-west. As Tyson put it:

"You see, the police will expect the stuff to come into town either by river from the south-east, or else cross-country by teams from the south. And they'll keep a fond eye on all canoes and teams coming from those directions. But they won't expect the booze to come drifting down from the north-west. So they won't watch in that direction. Anyhow, all the canoes coming down from the north country come in that way, and with the few men the police have got here, they certainly can't watch them all. I feel quite confident that we could bring in loads of stuff in broad daylight without anyone being any the wiser.

"Now this is my idea. We'll establish a cache up to the north-west, near the river. The exact spot will, of course, depend on the run of the trails up there from the south through the woods. Here in town we would rent a warehouse down by the river. I've already got one in mind. Of course we have to find some plausible reason for renting that warehouse, but that will be easy. We will bring our stuff down from up river at night, and store it in the warehouse till we can get it safely slipped to the blind pigs and bootleggers.

"There's another thing, too, in favour of this scheme. Winter will be here in a couple of months or so, and with all the dog-teams from the North running in we could easily ship our booze in on a dog-sleigh quite safely. We could cover the cases up with a load of fish or something, and nobody would suspect the real cargo underneath. As far as I can see, the scheme is fool-proof and quite safe,"

ended Mr. Tyson, swelling with pride and importance. "What do you think of it, Roy?"

"Sounds all right to me," remarked Roy. But he had actually discovered one serious flaw in the plan. Their discarded staff would certainly not take kindly to the idea of being left out of the business. They would certainly keep their eyes open, and the result would be some bare-faced blackmail, or tips to the police. But as the whole matter now was of purely academic interest to Roy, he did not consider it necessary to enlighten his companions. It would only create discussion, and lengthen the meeting.

"Now it's up to you, Roy, to decide on the most favourable location for our new cache," continued Tyson. "I suppose you know the forest trails quite well out there, and I presume there are several we could pick from?"

Roy nodded reflectively.

"Well, I guess there are a few we could use. But I'm not very familiar with that part of the district. Now let me see if I can think of something." He looked frowningly into space for a few moments. Suddenly a bright idea struck him. "I'll tell you what I'll do," he said with an eagerness which was not at all feigned. "I'll take a trip out there and have a look at the trails. I may be gone a week or two, but when I return I'll have everything doped out for you. How does that strike you?"

"Just the very thing to do!" exclaimed Tyson, beaming on Roy, while Crane's thick-lensed glasses flashed his approval in the latter's direction. "That's an excellent idea," enthused Mr. Tyson. "I knew we could rely on you to fix matters."

Roy received these signs of commendation with becoming modesty. At the same time he was wondering if Tyson's enthusiasm over his valuable assistance would be quite so ardent in a couple of weeks or so. He doubted it, and quite correctly as it happened.

For some time after that they continued their discus-

sion; but at last Roy, who was burning with impatience to get away, left them, pleading as excuse that he wanted to start on his scouting trip that same night, and consequently had several matters to attend to in that connection. Before he left it was agreed to leave their last consignment where Roy had cached it out in the woods. When he returned he was going to find means to bring it quietly into town.

Roy hurried away, immensely pleased with the turn events had taken. Now he had been given a clear week's start or more. Tyson wouldn't suspect his secret move before he was well hidden out in the woods. And he would take good care that he would leave no trail behind him. He knew of a short cut up to Swan Lake. It was a watercourse which was never, or very rarely, travelled by anybody. It was filled with rapids, and it called for a lot of heavy portaging and hard work to go in that way. So it was severely left alone by the prudent. Consequently Roy would be practically certain not to meet a human being who could give information as to the direction taken by him. All in all Roy was of the opinion that he had met with an amazing streak of luck.

When he got home he found that Joan had already returned.

"Well, Sis, did you manage to fix up everything?" he asked.

"Oh, yes. The canoe will be ready for you when you get over to Angus's place. He promised to load it himself, and get everything in shape for you. He was very nice about it all. He promised not to mention to a soul that you had bought an outfit at his place."

"That's fine. Though there ain't such a necessity for secrecy any more. Tyson played right into my hands this afternoon. He wants me to go up the river straight away to look at some timber, with a view to some timber-lease. So I'm going all right; but I'm going to forget to come

back," he explained with a grin. "Anyhow, it doesn't do any harm to be careful. Thank you ever so much for all you've done, Sis. You know, you're a real pal. Did you meet any nosy Parker on the way down to the canoe who wanted to know what you had in the gunny-sack? "

"No, not a soul."

"Then everything is just right. Sure you don't mind being left alone here all winter? "

"Of course I don't," laughed Joan. "I shall be perfectly all right. But, Roy, you'll be careful, won't you, dear? "

"Don't you worry. I know how to take care of myself out in the woods. You'll see me turn up soon after the spring break-up with a fine bunch of furs," he boasted. "Wish I could get a silver fox. If I do, I'll save it for you, and have the other females in this town go green with envy."

"That would be splendid," beamed Joan. "That would make me feel like a millionairess. I hope you'll have lots of luck. When are you going? "

"In an hour or so. Before I pull out I'm going to arrange with one of the boys over at the reserve to come over here every day to do your chores."

"That won't be necessary, Roy," protested Joan. "You know I can do that myself."

"No. I won't have you chopping wood and working like a slavey," retorted Roy firmly. "That's flat! So I'm set on having somebody come to help you."

"Thank you, Roy. It really will be nice to have somebody help me with the heavy work. Though I'll hardly have anything to do then," she smiled.

"Oh, you'll have plenty to do with cooking and all that. And for the rest you can enjoy life, what there is of it in this one-horse burg," grinned Roy.

"Well, I'll try to find it," laughed Joan. "But before you leave I'm going to cook you one good, square meal."

It will be the last meal any other person will cook for you for some time to come, I expect. Now sit down while I get busy in the kitchen."

A little over an hour later they had finished their meal, and Roy decided it was time to leave.

"Well, good-bye, Sis," he said, kissing Joan fondly. "I hope you'll have a good time while I'm away, and that you won't feel lonesome. And remember, not a word to a single soul about where I'm going."

"I'll remember, Roy. Take good care of yourself, and come back as early as you can in the spring. And I hope you'll have all sorts of luck in your trapping."

"Thank you, Sis. And I hope I shall have that silver fox for you when I return."

Joan watched from the open doorway for a few moments as he walked down the street. He turned once and waved to her, and she smiled and waved back.

A few minutes later she stepped back into the house. She sighed a little, and her face was gravely thoughtful. She did not at all like the secrecy with which Roy had surrounded his movements. But she could only hope that he had spoken the truth, and that there was really nothing more serious behind it all. But she couldn't rid herself of a feeling of uneasiness and apprehension. . . .

Late that same night a man was skulking in the shadows of the forest, which lined one side of the street which ran past the line of cottages of which the Bancroft bungalow formed one. He had taken up his position near the trail which formed the short cut to the centre of the town.

It was a dark, moonless night. Gusts of wind hissed through the tops of the tall, dark spruce trees from time to time, and heavy clouds were rolling up, gradually obliterating the stars overhead. It was a chill, damp night, with a presage of impending rain in the air.

The street was dimly lighted by a single electric bulb

on a pole half-way down the block; but there was enough light for the man over in the fringe of the forest to make out the vague outlines of shrubs and bushes in the small gardens surrounding the houses across the street. His whole attention was concentrated on one house, which was in complete darkness, and obviously deserted for the moment.

Ten, fifteen minutes passed by; but the man never relaxed his vigilance for a moment.

At last his straining eyes caught a slight movement near the objective of his observations. He stiffened and stood motionless, watching and waiting.

Presently the head of a man lifted carefully over the low fence, running round the grounds of the house. Even in that dim light the watcher could see that the head wore a cloth cap, drawn well down over the brow.

The head over there turned carefully and cautiously this way and that, as if whoever was there wanted to satisfy himself that the street was quite deserted. The next moment a man jumped nimbly over the fence, and began to walk quickly across the street towards the short cut to town.

The watcher cautiously retired a little farther into the shadow of the woods, and waited.

CHAPTER VII

PORTAGE BEND SUFFERS A FRESH SHOCK

CORPORAL WILLIAMS and Constable Wrenn made no sensational and triumphant entry into the town when they returned from their unsuccessful ambush. In fact, they crept into town as unobtrusively and furtively as a couple of cats entering a strange backyard.

They put their canoe into the small boat-house of the police down by the river, shouldered their outfit, and plodded glumly up to the barracks.

It was late in the afternoon when they arrived. Constable Wentworth, who sat at the desk in the front office, lifted his head eagerly when they marched in. But one look at their joyless countenances told him the tale.

"No luck?" he asked discreetly.

The new arrivals shook their heads in joint, emphatic negative, as they dumped their packs on the floor.

"Inspector in?" asked Williams.

"Yes, he's still in his office," answered the disappointed Curly Wentworth, his face expressing his sympathy with his unlucky comrades.

"All right. Here, Wrenn, you stow our outfit away, while I go along and sing the song about two dam' fools," remarked Williams bitterly.

He disappeared through the inner door, and strode quickly down the corridor to the main office. Though he dreaded reporting his ghastly failure to the inspector, he wanted to have it over and done with as soon as possible.

But the inspector's comments, after he had reported

his discomfiture in all its humiliating details, restored some of the corporal's badly shattered self-respect.

"Too bad, Corporal," were the inspector's words. His tone of voice was regretful and sympathetic without a note of censure. "But no blame attaches either to you or Wrenn. You carried out your orders carefully and intelligently. The smugglers were a little too smart and alert for us, that's all.

"Now, I wonder whether they actually suspected an ambush, or if posting of hidden sentries outside their cache is the usual precaution?" mused the inspector aloud. "Are you quite sure, Corporal, you weren't discovered at your temporary hiding-place up the river the day you pulled out?"

"Quite positive, sir," averred Williams firmly. "We holed up in a dense thicket a few miles below Bluff Rapids. As you know, sir, the river runs fairly straight there for a couple of miles or so, so we had a clear view of the river in both directions. And it was quite empty when we slipped into the brush. We were too well concealed to be seen from any passing canoe. We were even cautious enough not to build a fire for fear the smoke might be spotted, but ate our food cold that day."

"Are you sure you weren't trailed from town?"

"Quite, sir. We kept a sharp look-out."

"Many canoes passing your hiding-place?"

"Quite a few, sir, but the majority of them were coming down-stream. Three canoes passed coming from town, but they were occupied by north-country Indians and breeds, going back home. I had my glasses with me and observed clearly the crew of every canoe going past. I knew all the occupants of the canoes, and there was not one man from around here amongst them."

"H'm," grunted Weston. "Do you think you were discovered going down-stream that night?"

"That would be about impossible, sir. We proceeded

with the utmost caution. We let our canoe drift with the current more than we paddled. So it's hardly likely that anybody heard us. And it would be quite impossible for them to see us. The night was dark, and we hugged the shadows along the opposite bank like you told us, sir."

The inspector nodded his head.

"Of course French Micky might have discovered something when he came out to the cache that afternoon," continued Weston reflectively. "Though that's hardly likely. If he had, he would in all probability have warned the smugglers to keep away from the cache altogether. But all these speculations are fruitless," he remarked with a smile. "The sad fact remains that the smugglers have got clean away without leaving the slightest clue behind them, and we have to start all over again. Naturally the smugglers will establish a new cache in some other locality. Of course, we know John Hunter and French Micky are members of the gang, but that won't help us much. If we run them in we shan't get any useful information out of them, and on the other hand we would show our hand to the smugglers. So we'll leave them alone for the present. We'll have to get Angus to unleash a few of his bloodhounds again. But I expect the gang will keep quiet for a time after this. The whole business is a confounded nuisance," he exclaimed with a frown. "If it had been a question only of breaking up that gang, I shouldn't have minded so much. But as you know, I suspect that members, or a member, of that gang is intimately connected with the bank-robbery and the murder of Mitchell. And I want that outrage at the bank cleared up in the worst possible way."

"How is Sergeant Ware getting on with his investigations, sir?" hazarded the corporal.

"I really don't know. Whatever discoveries he's made so far he's kept strictly to himself. Ware was always a secretive chap, but efficient. If there's anything to dis-

cover, he'll discover it. He may spring a surprise on us one of these fine days. At least, I hope so.

"Well, Corporal," continued Weston with a smile, "don't you or Wrenn worry your heads about the unfortunate result of your expedition. We are all liable to be tripped up sometimes, especially when we are pitted against an organization like that gang, which is evidently directed by shrewd, clever brains. You run along, Corporal. There's nothing for you to do around the office this afternoon. And I suppose you want to spruce up a bit after your recent hibernation."

"I should like to very much, sir. Thank you, sir."

Corporal Williams left the office a much happier man than when he entered it. He went straight to Constable Wrenn, and informed that rather apprehensive youngster that there were to be no hard words, no disapproving scowls, no dark looks, no reproaches, in short: that all was well.

By the time the two relieved and elated officers had finished airing their personal opinions of their inspector, they had completely exhausted every superlative in their joint vocabularies.

And there were other matters which largely tended to recompense the corporal for his recent humiliating experiences. When he went to call on Joan Bancroft after his return, he was received with marked friendliness and pleasure, and what added immensely to his satisfaction was the fact that Mr. Tyson seemed to have faded out of the picture. He wondered quite a lot about this, but he asked no questions. He simply accepted the very satisfactory state of affairs with due gratification, without worrying his head much about the whys and wherefores. He passed Tyson a few times on the streets, but except for a curt exchange of nods they took no notice of each other.

Sergeant Ware was seldom seen around the barracks these days, and on the sparse occasions when he did put in an appearance, he refused to discuss his investigations in any way. He went about his business secretly and with quiet, grim patience. But he seemed gravely pre-occupied.

The booze-running also seemed to have ceased for the time being. At least, the bootleggers' most regular and devoted customers were observed to walk around town with a peeved, irritated expression on their faces, and in a most unusual state of sobriety. So it could be safely assumed that the flood of booze had suffered a check. So life passed quietly and uneventfully for the members of the detachment.

On the night of that eventful day, when Roy Bancroft had returned to town only to make a hurried exit, Corporal Williams escorted Joan Bancroft to a party at the house of mutual friends. Joan never mentioned a word to her escort about Roy's return and departure. She thought that was her best course in view of the promise Roy had obtained from her.

They danced merrily to the strains of a gramophone after supper, and it was past midnight before the party at last broke up.

Corporal Williams took Joan home, of course. As they walked along the wooden sidewalk, Joan suddenly stumbled against the protruding edge of a board. Williams promptly took hold of her arm to steady her, but when she had regained her balance Williams was reluctant to let go of her arm.

"I think you'd better let me hold on to you," he muttered, with a boldness which surprised himself. "These boards are very uneven in places."

"Yes, thanks. I think you'd better," smiled Joan.

So without further ado Williams tucked her arm under his own, and they strolled along, the corporal in a state of

supreme bliss, his heart beating a merry tattoo. He wished fervently that the distance to the Bancroft bungalow was twice as long, at least, as it was.

"It looks like rain," he observed presently, looking up at the dark sky above.

"Yes, it certainly does," agreed Joan.

After this spurt of feast of reason and flow of soul, silence again descended on them. But somehow they both found that there was really no necessity for conversation.

They soon arrived at Joan's home. Far too soon, growled Williams to himself. But he had another card to play, and he led it without delay.

"Oh, I say, Miss Joan, would you care to go to the movies with me to-morrow night?" he asked a little diffidently.

"I should love to," answered Joan promptly, smiling up at him. "I heard they were putting on an awfully good picture to-morrow, and I should like to see it very much."

"That's fine," exclaimed Williams with satisfaction. "I'll call for you around eight."

"Why not come up a little earlier and have supper with me before we go to the show?" asked Joan.

"Oh, really, that would be too much trouble for you," protested Williams.

"Not at all," laughed Joan. "I have to cook some supper for myself, and it won't be any trouble to prepare a bite for you at the same time."

"It's very kind of you to ask me, and I'll come with pleasure if you really think it won't be any trouble."

"None whatever."

"I'll be glad to come then. I'll be here at seven. I can hardly get away in time to be here earlier."

"That will be perfectly all right. Well, till to-morrow night then. And thanks awfully for seeing me home." Joan held out her hand to him.

"Please don't mention it," said Williams quickly. He was simply burning with the desire to utter some clever compliment, but, as usual, the right words eluded him. But to make up for it, he squeezed her hand with a reckless abandon and enthusiasm which almost made Joan wince with pain.

Williams strode along the short cut through the forest in a state of joyous elation. It was dark and damp in there under the spruces, but he never noticed it. To him the whole world was bright and cheerful just then. Even the rain, which began to fall as he neared the barracks, failed to damp his exuberant spirits.

The following morning broke clear and sunny. A faint, mild breeze wafted over the town from the east, and after the intermittent rain-showers which had fallen during the night, the air was pure and fresh, though there clung faintly to it the autumnal odours of decay.

While he was waiting for the inspector's arrival, Corporal Williams sat perched on the desk in the front office chatting with Constables Douglas and Wentworth. The door stood open to the street to let in the morning air.

Constable Wrenn was busy. It was to-day his turn to do the chores around the barracks, a task he cordially detested. He had now got to the last stage of his onerous task—sweeping the floor of the front office.

"Listen, Wrenn," remarked the corporal presently with a grin. He had for some time idly watched Wrenn's manipulation of the broom. "The usual vim and dash seem to be lacking in your efforts this morning. Your whole heart doesn't seem to be in your job, as it were. And we all know you simply love it."

"Oh, is that so?" snorted Wrenn pugnaciously, lifting a flushed, frowning face to the corporal. "How can you expect a fellow to be in form when he has his beauty-nap totally ruined by a certain gentleman coming stamping into the barrack-room during the small hours? Answer me

that! If you'd only come home at reasonable hours a fellow might get a chance to get rested occasionally."

"You don't say!" answered the grinning corporal. "In the first place I didn't *stamp* into the barrack-room. With touching forethought I removed my boots in this office and entered our sleeping chamber as light as a fairy. And secondly, you were so fast asleep that a gun discharged beside your bed wouldn't have shaken you out of dreamland."

"If I hadn't been awake how could I know what time you returned?" demanded Wrenn pertinently.

"That's easily explained. Your natural detective instinct would tell you that," laughed Williams, while Messrs. Douglas and Wentworth snickered audibly. "You're just doing a bit of deducting. No, sir. You were not awake at all. You were snoring too well and truly for that."

"Who? Me?" asked Wrenn, leaning on his broom and turning a face expressing the most scandalized amaze to his tormentor. "You know dam' well I never snore!"

"No? That's where you are quite wrong, my lad," retorted Williams patronizingly. "I can always tell a block away from the barracks when you are asleep by the sweet music in the air."

"You're a darn fabricator!" snapped Wrenn. "I put it to the others whether I snore or not. Do I, fellows?"

"I wouldn't say you *snored*," volunteered Douglas with a judicious air. "The word somehow doesn't quite fit. But I'm free to admit that at every trumpet blast you let out when you sleep, I can see the walls and ceiling of the room shake and shiver like agitated curtains."

The statement was received with pleased chuckles by Messrs. Williams and Wentworth, and the outraged and scandalized Mr. Wrenn returned to his sweeping fairly exuding haughty, aloof dignity.

At that moment they heard hurried footsteps on the

boarded sidewalk outside and the next moment a man burst into the room through the open doorway.

The new-comer was Mr. Simpson, one of the town's merchants, whose residence was on the same street as the Bancroft bungalow. But for a moment the four startled officers hardly recognized him. His normally placid, cheerful countenance was working in strong agitation, and he gasped for breath as if he had been running fast and furiously.

"What's the matter, Mr. Simpson?" asked the corporal quickly, jumping down from the table.

"There's a dead man lying near the trail through the woods up near my place," gasped Mr. Simpson.

For a few minutes the police officers stared at Mr. Simpson in incredulous, silent surprise; but the corporal quickly found his voice.

"Who is it?" he asked quickly.

"I don't know," was the answer. "As soon as I discovered the body I hurried away as fast as I could go to notify you. It was lying fifty feet or so to the side of the trail, not far from my end of it."

"How did you discover the body?" was the corporal's next question.

"I started for my office early this morning because there were some matters I wanted to attend to before the store opened. I had my retriever along, and he was running around in the woods looking for something to chase, like he always does. Suddenly I heard him bark; but gradually the bark turned into a queer noise, something between a howl and a whimper. The sound made me feel rather queer. I'd never heard him make sounds like that before. I was afraid the dog was hurt, so I walked over to him to investigate, and I found him standing sniffing the dead body of a man. It was thinly covered with brush. For a moment I just stood staring like a fool, hardly able to move. It's a rather gruesome experience stumbling unexpectedly

on a dead body," he remarked half apologetically, shuddering slightly. "But I came quickly to my senses and started for here as fast as I could go."

"But are you sure the man was dead?" asked Williams. "He may have been only a bum sleeping off a drunk."

"No. He was dead all right," answered Mr. Simpson positively. "He was lying face down, and there was a small pool of blood near his head."

On hearing this the corporal immediately snapped into action.

"Here, Wrenn!" he called. "You hurry along to the inspector's house at once and tell him about this. And then go along to the hospital and have them send the ambulance up to the far end of the trail. You come along with me, Curly. We'll go over with you straight away, Mr. Simpson."

They were soon hurrying along the darkened trail under the spruces. The ground was still damp after the night's rain. Mr. Simpson's dog, which had followed its master to the barracks, followed sedately in their wake. It seemed to have lost its appetite for adventures for the time being.

When the three men arrived at the point on the trail where they had to turn into the woods, Corporal Williams discovered in amongst the trees the vague outlines of several persons. He at once turned to Mr. Simpson with a frown.

"Did you tell anybody of your find, Mr. Simpson?" he asked, annoyance in his voice.

"Well, I met Jim Carson on the street as I was hurrying along to the barracks, and he wanted to know what all the hurry was about. So I told him. But I didn't think he would go along here," answered Mr. Simpson apologetically.

"Well, he's evidently here and has brought his pals along," growled Williams. "A dam' nuisance, but it can't be helped now."

They found Jim Carson and three other townsmen

standing some distance away from the still form on the ground, eyeing it with morbid, awed interest.

"Please, gentlemen, keep well back," ordered Williams shortly. "Curly, get the crowd back and see that nobody gets near the body, or the ground near it, till I've finished my examination."

Curly Wentworth took the small band in hand, and shepherded it well out of the way.

Corporal Williams walked across to the body. As he got near enough to see more clearly the outlines through the thin layer of brush a sudden, ghastly, horrified presentiment gripped him. He covered the rest of the distance in a few rapid strides, bent down, and after he had removed some of the brush, he reverentially and gently lifted the dead man's head so that he could see his face.

His sudden suspicion was tragically verified. The dead man was Sergeant Ware!

The corporal slowly and gently eased the head to the ground again, and for some moments he sat staring into space with heavy eyes. He felt stunned, and his mind was in a whirl.

But with an effort he shook himself out of his stupor, and he began his examination of the body.

He found no difficulty in determining how Ware had come to his death. He had been brutally murdered. As Mr. Simpson had already told, there was a small pool of congealed blood near the head. And when the corporal gingerly lifted the cloth cap which was still in position on the unfortunate sergeant's head, he discovered that the back of the skull had been smashed in by a heavy blow from some blunt weapon. Williams nodded his head thoughtfully at this discovery, as a man who sees a preconceived theory verified.

He replaced the cap, and began to remove the brush from the rest of the body.

Suddenly he went down on his knees, and carefully

extracted an object which was lying on the ground, touching the body.

He picked up the object and examined it narrowly for a few minutes. Suddenly he bent his head closely over it, and gradually his body stiffened and seemed to freeze where he sat. An expression of stark horror had spread over his face.

For a while he sat immovable, like a man in a trance, his face a picture of pallid, haggard misery.

At last he stirred. With a heavy sigh, and an expression of pain in his eyes, he thrust the object which had given him this horrible shock into a pocket in his tunic.

He rose to his feet, and with features set and drawn, he continued his examination of the body and the ground around. He felt the ground with his hand, then he lifted part of the body, slipped his hand under it, and felt the ground there. He particularly and minutely examined the spot where he had found the object which was resting in his tunic-pocket, but his examination obviously did not relieve the heavy strain under which he was labouring.

Finally he turned away from the body, and began to circle the space around it, his eyes on the ground. Gradually he began to wander towards the trail.

On his way he passed closely by the small knot of people under Wentworth's alert guard. The latter had closely followed the corporal's movements, but from where he stood it hadn't been possible for him to see the dead man's face when Williams lifted up the head, and he was burning with curiosity to know who it was. He stepped away from his charges, who were watching the proceedings in stolid, sombre silence, and walked up to his comrade.

"Who is it?" he asked in a low voice, a little awed by the unnaturally grave expression on the corporal's pale face.

Williams raised heavy, haggard eyes to Wentworth.

"It's Sergeant Ware," he said, hardly above a whisper.

Wentworth's face froze in horrified amazement.

"You mean it's—it's——" he stammered at last; but the corporal checked him.

"Hush. Don't say anything," he warned hurriedly. "I don't want anybody to know who it is just yet. Not before the inspector has arrived. You go back to those fellows and see that they don't tramp about."

Wentworth returned to the watching, curious group of townsmen, shaking his head in lugubrious bewilderment, while the corporal continued his wanderings.

At last he emerged on the trail, and carefully and minutely he examined the surface of the trail. Suddenly he went down on hands and knees and scrutinized one particular spot with great interest.

He was still in this position when he saw Inspector Weston come rapidly along the trail from the town end.

The corporal got up and walked quickly towards his superior. When he got up to him he stopped and saluted. "It's murder, sir," he announced briefly, in a toneless voice.

"Great Scott!" exclaimed the inspector. "And have you identified the victim?"

"I have, sir," answered the corporal heavily. "It's Sergeant Ware."

The inspector stared at the corporal in stupefied amazement for a few moments.

"Sergeant Ware?" he almost gasped at last, a scowl of incredulity on his face. "Are you quite sure?"

"Unfortunately yes, sir," answered Williams glumly.

The inspector drew a deep breath, and his face hardened as he stood lost in reflections. Presently he looked at his subordinate, and noticed the latter's pale, haggard face and pained eyes.

"This seems to have shaken you badly, Corporal," he remarked.

"It has, sir," admitted Williams with a sombre nod of his head. "It's been a horrible shock."

"How was Ware killed?" asked the inspector.

"The back of his head has been bashed in with some heavy, blunt weapon, sir," explained Williams. "He was killed right on this trail, over there where I was kneeling when you came along, sir. I found blood-spots on the ground there. It looks as if Ware has been taken completely by surprise, because there's not the faintest sign of any struggle. After Ware was killed, his body was dragged into the woods to the place it was found. There are plain marks on the ground all the way, where his body has been dragged along, sir."

"Well, we'll go along and have a look at things," said the inspector, starting forward.

The corporal showed him where he had found the traces of blood on the forest path. After Weston had studied them for a few moments they walked towards the body. The corporal led the inspector along two well-defined, parallel furrows which had been ploughed through the thick layers of dead spruce-needles which covered the ground under the trees.

"This is where the murderer dragged the body along," he explained.

Weston nodded his head.

"Carried him by the shoulders with the feet trailing on the ground," he muttered.

They passed the group of curious townspeople, but Weston paid no attention to them, except returning Constable Wentworth's salute.

Arrived at the body, the inspector knelt down and examined it carefully. He paid particular attention to the fatal wound in the head.

"H'm," he grunted. "Did this wound suggest anything to you, Corporal?" he asked, turning his face over his shoulder to the attentive Williams.

"Yes, sir. It certainly occurred to me that there was great similarity between this wound and the wound which killed Mitchell, the bank watchman."

"You're right," said the inspector grimly. "I'm willing to take my oath that this wound was inflicted by a similar instrument, if not the same, as that which killed Mitchell. It's one of these dam'd bank robbers again. Probably Ware was getting hot, and they knew it. Give me a hand here. We'll turn the body over and see what we can find in Ware's pockets."

As soon as the body had been turned on its back a gasp went up from the small knot of watchers. The identity of the dead man was now revealed to them. But Weston and the corporal paid no attention to them. They examined each pocket of the dead sergeant's clothing in turn, but found nothing more interesting than the dead man's watch, some loose cash, and a few other articles which a man usually carries about with him.

When they had finished their search the inspector frowned.

"This is significant," he muttered to the corporal. "I know for a fact that Ware always carried a note-book around with him. But the note-book is not here. His watch and money have been left alone, so it's obviously not a case of common robbery. There's no doubt in my mind that this murder has been committed by someone involved in the bank robbery, to seal Ware's lips. He must have stumbled on some important clue, and they've become aware of it in some manner. And naturally they would remove his note-book. It would, in all probability, contain a record of his investigations so far, and the criminals, of course, didn't want that record to fall into our hands. We certainly seem to be up against a wide-awake, determined gang, which obviously stops at nothing."

He paused and looked searchingly at the ground around them.

"Not a foot-print would show on the ground here," he remarked after a few moments, a frown of annoyance on his face. "This mat of spruce-needles is just as springy as a rug. It wouldn't hold a foot-print for one second. I suppose you didn't find any, Corporal?"

"No, sir. But I think I've found a clue to the murderer, sir," said Williams in a grave, low voice.

Weston looked quickly at him, keen interest in his eyes.

"You have?" he exclaimed. "And what is it?"

"Well, sir," said Williams hesitatingly, "I found a certain object near the body, but with your permission, sir, I'd rather not produce it till we are quite alone. It's rather public here just now," he ended, indicating the group of morbidly curious people, which had now swelled by four or five more persons.

Weston shot a quick, surprised glance up at the corporal's gravely troubled face.

"Right you are," he said. "We'll wait and have a look at it when we get back to the office. Here's Wrenn, so I suppose the ambulance is here."

Wrenn came quickly up to them, saluted, and reported that the ambulance was waiting out on the street. Young Wrenn's eyes had widened when he discovered who the dead man was, and his voice had been far from steady when he addressed the inspector, though he had striven manfully to appear the hard, unimpressionable policeman.

"All right, Wrenn," said Weston. "I think we can remove the body now. I suppose you're through with your investigations, Corporal?"

"Yes, sir."

Weston then gave Wrenn orders to have a stretcher brought up, and to have the body removed to the mortuary at the hospital.

"And tell the doctor to perform a post mortem examination as soon as possible, and ask him to let me have his

opinion as soon as he's finished," he directed. "If you're ready, Corporal, we'll go along to the office."

When they had returned to the barracks, the inspector sat down at his desk.

"Now, Corporal, let me have a look at your clue," he suggested.

Without a word Williams pulled a tobacco-pouch out of his pocket, and placed it on the desk before the inspector. The inspector bent his head over it and studied it with interest.

It was an ordinary leather pouch, with a small silver disk fastened on the face of the flap. There was a monogram on the disk, but the silver was worn to the degree that it was a little difficult to make out the letters.

"Do you know to whom this belongs?" asked Weston, lifting his eyes to the corporal.

"Unfortunately I do, sir," answered Williams unhappily. "It belongs to Roy Bancroft."

The inspector started in his chair, and an expression of confounded amaze swept across his features.

"Are you sure?" he snapped.

"Quite sure, sir," answered Williams tonelessly. "I've often seen it in his possession. And his initials are on that silver disk."

Again Weston bent his head closely down to the pouch. He pulled out his handkerchief and polished the disk with it.

After a few minutes he lifted his head, an expression of grave consternation on his face.

"You're right, Corporal," he said quietly. "The initials are an R and a B intertwined. Where did you find it?"

"It was lying beside the body, actually touching it. I suppose it must have dropped out of the murderer's pocket when he bent over the body to cover it with brush.

He wouldn't have seen it drop, as it was very dark last night."

"Why do you say last night?" asked the inspector quickly. "Any special indications that the murder was committed then?"

Corporal Williams nodded his head.

"Yes, sir. I returned to barracks rather late last night," he explained dully, feeling a stab of pain when he remembered how bright everything had looked then. "It was roughly about half-past twelve in the morning. Just before I got in the first shower of rain started. As you remember, sir, there had been no rain previous to that yesterday. When I examined Sergeant Ware's body a little while ago, I noticed that the ground under the body was quite dry, while the ground all around and the exposed parts of the clothing were wet. I saw Sergeant Ware alive at six o'clock last night, so the murder must have taken place some time between that hour and one o'clock in the morning."

Weston nodded his head.

"But this tobacco-pouch," he said. "It may have got there accidentally before the murder, you know."

"I don't think so, sir. You can see for yourself, sir, that the pouch can hardly have been lying in the woods for any length of time. The tobacco inside is quite fresh. And it can hardly have been dropped by some innocent person after the murder. He couldn't have dropped his pouch where it was found without stumbling over the body, and if that had happened he would certainly have come straight to the police and reported his find. You see, sir, the pouch was resting with one corner on the edge of the sergeant's coat. And another significant thing, sir. The ground covered by it was quite dry, and so was the part facing down to the ground, while as you see, sir, the top is still quite wet."

"That seems to settle it," remarked Weston, shaking

his head, while a shadow crossed his face. "It certainly looks as if the body and the pouch have been placed where they were found at the same time. And that can only mean one thing: that the owner of that pouch is the murderer. But I must admit that Roy Bancroft was about the last person I should have suspected. Of course I know he's a bit wild and headstrong, and that he's not exactly a model youth in many ways; but that he should be such a ruthless, brutal, murdering fiend, passes my comprehension. Yet there is that damnable evidence. My God!" exclaimed the inspector. "This discovery nearly makes me sick. The idea that the brother of Joan Bancroft, one of the nicest, most straight-forward girls I've ever met, should be a cold-blooded murderer is almost more than I can stomach. It seems too ghastly and preposterous to be true."

He broke off, and stared moodily out through the window at his right elbow.

Suddenly he turned his eyes quickly back to the corporal, who'd been watching him in silent misery.

"Listen," said the inspector quickly. "I have just remembered that Joan told my wife a few days ago that Roy was out of town. Are you sure he has returned?"

"No, sir. But I remembered that Roy was supposed to be away from town when I found that pouch. Thinking it over, though, the idea struck me that his trip out of town might be only a ruse. He might have told his sister and friends that he was going away, while he remained here in hiding somewhere to check up on Sergeant Ware's movements."

"Of course he may have done that," agreed the inspector, and again he relapsed into brooding, frowning silence.

Presently he turned to the corporal again.

"Have you formed any theory about it all?" he asked.

"Yes, sir."

" Well, let me have it. I'll check it up with my own, so we can see where we stand "

Williams thought for a moment, to arrange his thoughts into short, concise narrative.

" First I must tell you, sir, that Sergeant Ware told me, some time ago, that he had certain suspicions against a certain individual in this town with regard to the bank robbery. And he volunteered the further information that he intended to burgle that individual's house to try to pick up some evidence there."

" He told me about a suspect," murmured Weston. " But he didn't mention the intended burglary. Did he give you any hint as to the identity of his suspect? "

" No, sir, not the slightest."

Weston frowned.

" Same here," he said. " Ware was really too secretive. I suppose, though, that he had everything down in his note-book, and now the note-book is gone. However, we'll search his room up at the hotel. We may find something there, though I'm afraid we won't. He would hardly have left any notes like that behind him. However, go on with your theory."

" Well, sir, my idea is, that one of the men involved in the bank robbery shadowed Sergeant Ware while he was here. Last night the sergeant probably carried into effect his plan of entering the suspect's house. The criminal watched him, and seeing that Ware was closing in on him, he decided to do away with him. I suppose he sneaked up on Sergeant Ware on that dark forest trail when Ware was on his way back to town, and killed him with a black-jack or some such instrument. Then he dragged his victim in under the trees and covered him up with brush, and in doing this he lost his tobacco-pouch out of his pocket. And as the pouch belongs to Roy Bancroft, I can't see, sir, how we can come to any other conclusion than that Bancroft is the unknown criminal.

Besides, Bancroft's home is, as you know, sir, in that part of the town, so perhaps that was the house Sergeant Ware intended to burglarize," ended the corporal gloomily.

Weston gravely nodded his head.

"Your theory coincides about exactly with my own," he remarked. "But that the evidence should point towards young Bancroft as the perpetrator of these appalling crimes comes as a decided shock to me. I knew his father well, and he was one of the straightest, most upright men I've ever known. And that his son should develop into a callous, ruthless, brutal murderer is almost beyond belief. And then there's this sweet, tender-hearted young sister of his who wouldn't deliberately hurt a fly. I can't understand it at all." The inspector shook his head in deep perplexity.

"It's ghastly," he continued shortly. "This is going to be a terrible, horrifying experience for that young girl, Joan Bancroft. It turns me sick right down to the bottom of my soul, thinking of what this will mean to her in agony of mind and torture of soul. It's terrible! But we have to go on. Duty is duty," he said with a sigh, shrugging his shoulders with a gesture of helplessness.

Again the inspector scowled heavily out of the window, lost in thought. Then with a fresh sigh he again turned his attention to the corporal.

"Now there is one small point that's missing in our theory," he said. "Would it be possible for Sergeant Ware to enter the Bancroft bungalow secretly last night? We must find out if Miss Bancroft was at home, or whether the place was deserted."

"I can answer that question now, sir. Miss Bancroft was away from home last night. In fact we both attended a party, and I escorted her home after midnight. The bungalow was dark and deserted when we arrived there, sir."

"Then that might have been the sergeant's objective,"

mused the inspector. "And you saw nothing suspicious in that neighbourhood?"

"Nothing at all, sir. All was quiet. I walked back to the barracks along that short cut through the forest, and I must have passed the scene of the murder either shortly after, or shortly before, the murder was committed. You remember I told you, sir, that the first shower of rain began to fall shortly before I got to the barracks. And the murder was committed before the rain started. But all was quiet in the forest when I passed through. There was neither sound nor movement anywhere."

"H'm," grunted Weston thoughtfully. "It certainly begins to look rather black for young Bancroft. The first thing we have to do is to get hold of him. I hope with all my heart that he's got an alibi, and that he can explain to our complete satisfaction how his tobacco-pouch happened to be where it was found. But I'm afraid that is a futile hope," he sighed. "You'd better go across to Tyson's office, Corporal, straight away, and find out all about Bancroft's movements for the past few days up to yesterday, if they know anything about them."

"Very well, sir," said the corporal.

He turned away and walked heavily out of the office. He had never thought that he should ever hate Duty half as much as he hated it just then.

CHAPTER VIII

CORPORAL WILLIAMS TAKES THE TRAIL

As Corporal Williams walked along the streets towards Tyson's office with heavy steps, he was sunk in gloomy, harrowing reflections. He cordially hated himself. He accused himself of being a despicable, mean, sneaky traitor to Joan. Instead of doing his utmost to keep trouble and despair away from her, he had actually been instrumental in bringing her brother within the shadow of the gallows. Why hadn't he suppressed that damnable bit of evidence against Roy while there was still time? Why had he been such a brainless, stupid fool? What mattered honour, duty, and even life, when it came to saving Joan from pain and misery?

His only excuse was that he had thought of it too late. Not till after he had blurted out everything to the inspector. Events had moved so quickly that morning, and his brains had been taxed so heavily with the main issues that he had not caught sight of the side issues till it was too late. And, of course, the principles of duty, duty first and duty last, had been impressed on him so firmly, and had been drilled into him for so long that he had told everything to the inspector almost automatically, as a matter of course, without reflecting on the consequences for other persons. But if he had been given time for a few moments of quiet reflection, his course might have been quite different.

As he walked along filled with regret and self-reproach he swore, however, that he would do his utmost to save

Joan from the disgrace of seeing Roy sitting in the dock, branded a felon. That was the least he could do for her, whatever the consequences to himself.

After a while he squared his shoulders and walked along more briskly. His mind was made up. He knew what he should do, and he was going to tackle his task with a clear, cool brain. But his first step would be to find Roy. Before he found the latter he could do nothing.

When he entered Mr. Tyson's office he found Mr. Crane there alone.

"Good morning, Corporal," was Mr. Crane's punctilious, courteous greeting. "What can I do for you?"

"Good morning, Mr. Crane. Is Roy Bancroft around?"

"No. He's not been in this morning. I haven't seen him since yesterday afternoon."

Williams's pulse began to throb, and he felt a dryness in his throat. Here was proof positive that Roy had actually been in town last night. He had entertained the slim hope that Roy might be able to furnish an alibi, but now that last faint hope had been decisively shattered.

With an effort he managed to appear calm, almost indifferent.

"You don't know where I can find him?" he asked.

"At his home most likely," answered Crane. "Is anything wrong?" Crane sounded curious.

"No. I just want to see him privately," answered the corporal quietly. He was certainly not going to give away any information. "Mr. Tyson not in this morning?"

"No. He went out a short while ago to see a man about some town lots. I don't think he'll be away long though. Will you wait for him?"

The corporal thought for a few moments.

"Do you think Roy Bancroft might be with him?" he asked.

"No, that's hardly likely. I think you'll find Ban-

croft at his home. I seem to remember that he asked Mr. Tyson for this forenoon off, as he had some matters to attend to at his home. But I was very busy at the time, so I'm not quite sure of my facts." He smiled a little apologetically.

"Well, I'll go along and see if he's home," remarked Williams. "If I don't find him there I'll come back and see if Mr. Tyson knows where I can find him."

He walked out of the office, his heart as heavy as lead within him. The last link in the chain of evidence against Roy Bancroft was now complete. And all the links seemed strong and solid. He couldn't detect any weakness anywhere, wherever he looked.

Miserably he guided his steps towards the forest trail, which led to the street where the Bancrofts lived. He hated to face Joan with all this on his mind, but he simply had to find Roy Bancroft as soon as possible.

When he passed the place where the murder had been committed, he paused. There were no traces now of the tragedy which had taken place there not so many hours previously. The woods were quiet and deserted, and patches of sunlight brightened the gloom under the trees. To the corporal it seemed as if it all must have been a wild, impossible dream.

With a despondent shake of his head, he continued his walk. He forced a smile when Joan herself opened the front door after he had knocked.

"Good morning, Miss Joan," he greeted, trying hard to sound cheery and breezy.

"Oh, good morning, Corporal," smiled Joan, looking a little surprised nevertheless. "This is an unexpected pleasure. Please come in."

The corporal removed his Stetson and followed her into the sitting-room. The room was empty, discovered Williams to his chagrin. Roy was not there as he had fondly hoped.

"Is Roy at home?" asked the corporal casually.

"No, he's out. In fact he's out of town. He left yesterday afternoon for the North," answered Joan. "He has gone out trapping for the forthcoming season."

This information came as a shocked surprise to the corporal. So Roy had already fled.

"What time did he leave?" he asked abruptly, forgetting all subtlety in his excitement.

"Shortly after five yesterday afternoon," answered Joan, with a look of surprise on her face at his abruptness.

"You are sure he left town at that hour?" asked the corporal eagerly.

"I certainly am. He said good-bye to me here at that time, and was going straight down to his canoe. But why do you ask? Is anything wrong?" she asked a little anxiously. She had suddenly remembered Roy's secretiveness yesterday, and his injunctions to her not to mention anything about his trip to anyone. Perhaps she had been careless in telling the corporal that he had struck out for the woods, she reproved herself; but the information had slipped out before she had time to think.

At Joan's question the corporal took a firm grip on himself. He knew Roy had not left town immediately after having said good-bye to Joan. But he must keep all this sordid, wretched business from her at all costs.

"Oh, there's nothing wrong," he lied with an effort, trying hard to make his voice sound natural, and forcing a smile. "I was just wondering. Where did he go?"

But Williams was a poor actor. At least, he was not clever enough to deceive a woman's intuition. Joan looked searchingly into his face, read the signs of tenseness and grimness underlying his forced smile, and her heart was gripped with fear.

"There is something wrong!" she declared. "I can see it in your face. Please tell me what it is." Her words sounded like a command rather than a request.

"There's nothing to tell. Really nothing at all," parried the corporal frantically. "Just common curiosity on my part. I was merely curious to know in what part of the country Roy intended to establish his trapping camp."

But Joan refused to be put off.

"You are not telling me the truth, Corporal. You are concealing something. Tell me what it is. If my brother is in any trouble I have a right to know," she said with quiet determination.

"But I tell you, it's nothing. Nothing for you to worry about, I mean," blurted Williams desperately. "I only want to get some information from Roy, so I have to find him."

"It's no use, Corporal. You are a poor liar," said Joan, never taking her eyes off his face. "I can see you're not telling the truth. I demand to know what is the matter."

Williams's eyes were troubled.

"Really, Miss Joan, I—I can't tell you," he faltered miserably. "It's too—too—I mean, it's police business, and I really can't tell you what it's all about. It's nothing that affects you in any way, really."

"My brother's troubles are mine," said Joan quietly. "So please tell me the whole truth. I insist!"

"I—I really can't!" gasped the wretched corporal. He had never dreamt that the interview was going to take this turn.

"You can and you will!" cried Joan with firm determination. She walked over to the door and placed herself with her back against it. "I insist on knowing what it's all about, and I won't let you leave this room till you tell!"

Williams looked helplessly at her. He didn't know what to do, what to say. He knew he had been driven into a corner, and he couldn't see how he could extricate

himself without telling her the truth. His heart quailed at the very thought; but, he reflected, in a few hours' time Joan would hear about the murder, and with her shrewd mind she would certainly suspect the connection between the murder and his inquiries. So perhaps it would be better to tell her the whole ghastly business now when she was keyed up for it, instead of keeping her in suspense, and let her draw her deductions from rumours and hearsay. But Williams felt quite limp, and his throat was curiously dry at the thought of what he had to say.

"I—I really wish you wouldn't press the question, Miss Joan," he said, looking at her with haggard, pleading eyes. "It's really such a—a bad business."

Joan's eyes widened a little, and a shadow of fear shot across her face. But her gaze never wavered. She was determined to know all, regardless of the pain the truth might cause her.

"Tell me," she prompted briefly.

Williams swallowed hard and painfully a few times. He found it almost impossible to speak. His eyes slipped away from hers and sought the floor. He had never in all his life felt quite so wretched and miserable as he felt just then.

"Sergeant Ware, one of our men, was murdered here in town last night," he said at last in a low voice, hardly more than a whisper.

An expression of horror flashed into Joan's face.

"How horrible!" she gasped. "Do you mean that detective who was up here?"

Williams nodded his head dumbly.

"But this is terrible," exclaimed Joan with a shudder. "First poor Mitchell's murder a short time ago, and now—this."

For the moment the shock of hearing about this fresh tragedy had made her forget about Roy and the arguments which had led up to the corporal's disclosure; but

suddenly it all came back to her with a rush, and a monstrous, ugly, terrifying suspicion shot into her mind.

"And—and what has this murder to do with Roy?" she faltered, her voice throbbing with trepidation.

For a fraction of a second Williams met her grave, questioning eyes, his own filled with commiseration and pity. Then his gaze shifted to the floor again.

"Roy's tobacco-pouch was found beside the murdered man," he muttered miserably.

Joan recoiled as if she had been struck when her mind grasped the full import of the corporal's words, and her face grew stark with horror. She gazed at the corporal with an expression of fascinated terror in her eyes, and for a few moments she stood there like a frozen statue, then she tottered across the floor to the nearest chair and sank into it, limp and shaken.

A tense, throbbing silence pervaded the room, while she sat staring dazedly ahead of her, her face gradually paling, till it was white to the lips. After a while she leaned back in her chair and closed her eyes, her hands convulsively clutching the arm-rests.

The corporal took a step forward in alarm. He was afraid Joan was going to faint. But she stopped him with a gesture.

"Please leave me alone for a few moments," she begged in a faint voice. "I shall be all right presently."

"Shall I get you a glass of water?" asked the corporal nervously.

"No, thank you. Just leave me alone for a few minutes."

Gradually a faint flush began to steal back into her pallid cheeks, and presently she opened her eyes and looked at the corporal.

"Tell me everything," she whispered in a tremulous voice. "I feel strong enough now to bear it."

After a short hesitation the corporal told his story. His

voice shook with emotion and pity. He told her briefly how and where Sergeant Ware's body had been found, his discovery of Roy's tobacco-pouch, and the obvious deductions the police had drawn from that find.

As the tale progressed Joan gradually seemed to regain her composure, and she listened attentively. And by the time the corporal had finished his wretched tale her eyes had lost their dazed, haunted expression.

She looked up at Williams with a touch of scorn in her gaze.

"And you mean to tell me, Corporal, that because you happen to discover my brother's tobacco-pouch near the body of a murdered man, you immediately brand him as the murderer?"

The corporal spread his hands in a gesture of helplessness.

"What other conclusion could we come to?" he asked dully.

"But this is quite absurd!" protested Joan. "I had really thought better of you than this. Why should Roy commit this dastardly crime? What motive could he have? I understand there's always a motive for every crime."

The corporal looked helplessly at her. He was loath to say any more. He felt he had said more than enough as it was. Too much, in fact.

But Joan completely ignored his reluctance to speak.

"Well, have you discovered a motive?" she challenged, looking defiantly at him.

Williams squirmed uncomfortably. How he wished he could get away from the subject!

"I—I really think it would be much better if we didn't discuss this subject any further," he muttered, looking appealingly at her.

But Joan never wavered.

"But we *must* discuss it further!" she declared

emphatically, almost fiercely. "You have brought a very grave and serious charge against my brother, and I must know on what evidence you actually base it. What was Roy's motive?"

"I didn't say he had any motive," parried the distressed Williams.

"No, you didn't. But your whole manner suggests that you are still holding something back, so tell me the whole truth. I don't want to be deceived."

"Please, Miss Joan, won't you let the matter rest as it is till I've had a talk with Roy?" begged Williams beseechingly and earnestly. "He may be able to explain everything to our satisfaction. If you will only tell me where he has gone, I'll go straight out to him and have a talk with him."

"I won't give you even the smallest hint as to his whereabouts before I know exactly how matters stand," answered Joan, her attitude decidedly hostile. "So tell me what further cause you have for your suspicions."

The corporal hesitated for a moment.

"I thought you had understood from my earlier explanations what we consider the motive underlying the crime," he said hesitatingly.

"I don't understand, or else I shouldn't have asked," cried Joan uncompromisingly. "So please tell me at once every circumstance." Her manner had become distant and imperious.

The corporal realized it was useless to try to avoid the issue, so he shrugged his shoulders and took the plunge.

"You see, we have evidence which indicates almost to the exclusion of any doubt that the man who murdered Sergeant Ware also murdered Mitchell, and engineered the robbery at the bank," he explained in a dull, toneless voice. "Our theory is that the murderer did away with the sergeant because the latter was getting too hot on his tracks for those other crimes."

When he had finished speaking Joan sprang to her feet, and she faced him with eyes sparkling with anger, while a red, hectic patch flared out on each of her cheeks.

"This is really too much!" she cried, her voice throbbing with wrath. "It's monstrous! With nothing more to go on than the most slender and trivial evidence you try to build up a case against Roy, and try to prove him the most wicked, vicious fiend in the world! I never thought you would have proved yourself so vile and contemptible, Corporal. I thought you were our friend. At least you've always pretended to be!"

"I still am your friend," cried Williams impulsively. "But can't you see? We must follow up every clue we find wherever it leads. It's only our duty."

"Oh, yes. Duty! Nothing matters to you when it comes to duty. Not even friendship and honour!" exclaimed Joan bitterly. "No means are too low to employ as long as you can find a scape-goat to prove that you're attending strictly to duty. You come here under the guise of friendship to try to trick me into revealing to you my brother's whereabouts, so you can get your scape-goat, and prove your devotion to duty to the world! Do you call that honourable?"

Corporal Williams winced at the scathing, biting scorn in her voice.

"Please, Miss Joan, don't talk like that," he pleaded. "You can't really mean it. I don't want Roy for a scape-goat. I want to help him. Can't you please trust me?"

"Help Roy!" she repeated contemptuously. "Help him to a felon's cell and to the—the gallows, you mean," she said in a choking voice. "No, I won't trust you! I know your slogan: always to get your man. And no means are beneath you when it comes to vindicate your reputation!"

"Oh, but please listen," pleaded Williams desperately.

"Now you are really unjust! I swear I've no other intention than to help Roy. Won't you please trust me and help me by telling me where I can find him?"

"No, I won't! You go along and hunt him. Hunt him to his death, but don't expect me to betray him!" she stormed, her eyes flashing.

"But, please, please listen," stammered Williams frantically.

"I won't listen to any more of your lies!" cried Joan unbendingly. "I've heard enough. Please go, and leave me alone."

"But I can't help Roy if you refuse to assist me!" protested Williams earnestly.

"Please spare me any more of your tricks!" countered Joan passionately. "You know you only want to trap me into betraying Roy. All you want is to find out where he is, so you can go out and arrest him for your own glorification. Please go. You have caused me enough distress as it is, and I—I can't stand any more." The last words came in a broken whisper.

Williams shot a compassionate glance at her. Her eyes were as defiant as ever, but her lips were trembling and her hands shook. Even to Williams's inexperienced eyes it was clear that she was on the verge of hysteria and that no good would come out of prolonging the interview.

"Very well," he said in a sad, tired voice. "Since you refuse to help me, I must do the best I can alone. But I hope I shall be able to prove to you some day that I'm not quite as bad as you try to make me out."

Joan kept silent, and after a last imploring look at her he turned and walked out of the room.

As soon as Joan was alone she sank back into the chair. She was trembling all over. All animation had died out of her eyes and face, and left them drawn and haggard. Her mind was in a chaotic whirl. Her defiant, uncompromising attitude towards the corporal had not been

dictated by an absolute faith in Roy's innocence. An ugly, fearful doubt had kept hammering on her mind since the corporal had first put the suspicions of the police into words. Why had Roy been so secretive? Why had he left town so suddenly, and with such stealth? Didn't that point towards a guilty mind? she asked herself in an agony of apprehension. If she had been convinced of Roy's innocence she might have trusted the corporal. But with her own doubts searing her mind like a red-hot iron, her protective instinct and her love for her brother cried out to her to shield him and keep him out of the hands of the police.

Her whole body burnt in an agony of hot fever as she sat there trying to still the wildly whirling wheel of her fearsome thoughts, spinning madly in her head.

Suddenly she sat up straight, and smote the arm of her chair with her clenched fist.

"Roy can't have done it! He can't have done it!" she cried desperately, her eyes blazing defiance.

But the next moment she had flung her arms over the arm-rest, her head had dropped on her outflung arms, and her whole body shook with convulsive sobs. . . .

In the meantime Corporal Williams was walking towards the river with a heavy heart and a dull feeling of hopelessness pressing on his mind. His face had lost its usual appearance of boyish good humour and was set in grim, stern lines. Once his lips twisted in a wry smile, when he remembered his joyful anticipations of last night for the morrow. And this was what the morrow had brought!

The fact that Joan would not trust him had stung and hurt him to the bottom of his soul. He had never flattered himself that she cared very deeply for him, but at least he had hoped that she would consider him a friend worthy of trust. But instead of showing any trust she had lashed him with scorn and contempt. And worse than that, he

had actually read hate in her eyes—hate towards him and his profession.

Williams sighed heavily. It was the first time that the stern realities of life had gripped him so closely and personally, and he felt appalled and not a little bewildered.

But one firm resolution stood out clearly in his mind. He was going to prove to Joan that she had misjudged him cruelly. This he was grimly determined to do. But before he could do anything he must find Roy.

There was no doubt in his mind that Roy was guilty. He could not see how it could be otherwise. All the evidence pointed towards him, and there was even one point, which the corporal had not disclosed to the inspector, which further seemed to incriminate Roy.

That night when he and Wrenn had their encounter with the smugglers the voice of one of the band had seemed familiar to Williams, but he had been unable to place it. But when he had pondered matters in his mind after he had found the tobacco-pouch by Sergeant Ware's body, it had suddenly struck him with sickening force that the elusive voice had been Roy's! The latter had spoken in the Cree tongue; that was what had led the corporal astray. He had never heard Roy speak Cree before, and his mind had therefore groped around to make the voice fit any of those of his acquaintances to whom Cree was the normal tongue. But as he had sat there by Ware's body with Roy's pouch in his hand that morning, turning the whole ghastly affair over in his mind, the sound of that voice had flashed back into his mind, startlingly clear. And the intonation of that voice had been Roy's, though the actual words had been spoken in a strange tongue. The police had always expected to find at least one of the bank robbers and killers of Mitchell among the smugglers. And they were quite positive that the murder of Ware had been committed by one of the bank robbers. So the circumstance that Roy was evidently a member of the

smuggling gang was another strong link in the chain of evidence against him.

But, as already mentioned, the corporal had not disclosed his suspicion to the inspector. After all, he had argued to himself, his suspicion was only surmise and not concrete evidence, so it would be unfair to Roy to produce it. But he was fully convinced in his own mind that he was right, and that Roy Bancroft was the murderer of both Mitchell and Ware.

Would it be at all likely, he asked himself as he walked along, that Roy had really gone out trapping? Wouldn't he sooner flee the country after his last crime?

Williams weighed these questions carefully in his mind, and finally he came to the conclusion that there was no reason why Roy should flee. He would hardly know that he had left any evidence behind him. If he had he would have come back to retrieve his tobacco-pouch. The murderer had proved himself a resolute, determined man who evidently didn't shrink from any risk. So as soon as he had missed the pouch he would in all likelihood have gone back to see if he had dropped it anywhere near the scene of his latest crime.

Of course he might not have missed it before it would be too late to go back for it. But even so, would the true significance of the loss occur to him? Hardly. He would probably think he had mislaid it somewhere and not worry any further.

Anyhow, Williams was going down to the shed by the river where the Bancrofts kept their canoes to see if one was missing.

He found the shed locked, but there was a small window set in one of the walls, and through that Williams was able to look inside.

He saw at once that the bigger of the two canoes the Bancrofts possessed had gone. There was only the small, light craft, used by Joan on the river, left in the shed.

And Williams made another important discovery. A collection of steel traps which he had seen hanging on one of the walls on former visits to the canoe-shed had all disappeared.

For a while the corporal stood in deep thought.

Evidently Roy had actually gone out trapping, he reflected. If he had intended flight down the river he would certainly have taken the lighter, faster craft. And in that case he would certainly not have loaded his canoe with a heavy pile of steel traps.

But to which part of the vast North-West had Roy gone? How could he trace him? were the questions which exercised the corporal's mind. And he had to find Roy quickly if he was to be any use to him. Freeze-up would be here in another month or so, and if he didn't find Roy before winter held the North in its icy grip matters would be awkward, even disastrous.

Williams turned away from the canoe-shed and walked rapidly back to town. The most likely places to pick up some hint about Roy's intended movements would be at the two big stores, the Hudson Bay Company's and the North Star Trading Company's. Roy had in all probability purchased his outfit from one of them before he started out. The two stores mentioned were the only places in town where complete stock was kept of all that was required for a hunting or trapping expedition. And while buying his outfit Roy might have dropped some remark which might serve as a clue to his destination.

Williams tried the two stores in turn, but drew a blank at both places. He had not been able to pick up the slightest scrap of information about Roy. In fact, the latter hadn't been inside any of the stores for a long time. But if he had gained no information he had not imparted any. The staffs in both stores had evinced vivid and burning curiosity, and had put tentative questions to him. But all queries had been discouraged by the corporal in no un-

certain manner. But he had left behind him an excited atmosphere of surmise and speculation. The news of the sergeant's murder was all over town by now, and the staffs of the two stores were wondering what connection there was between the murder and the corporal's inquiries for Bancroft. And quickly whispered head-to-head exchanges of opinions and theories were in full swing, which grew louder and bolder as the gossipers got into their strides.

In a fever of impatience Corporal Williams next guided his steps towards the local pool-room. He might find some of Roy's friends there, who might be able to give him some tip. But he was not very hopeful. Even if any of them knew anything about Roy's intended movements, they would in all probability keep their mouths sealed.

As Williams walked along the streets his mind wrestled incessantly with the all-important problem of Roy's probable destination.

Suddenly a name flashed into his mind, apparently from nowhere. Swan Lake! He stopped dead in his tracks, a deep frown of concentration forming on his brow. Now why had that name suddenly popped up? he asked himself. He stood sunk in thought for a few moments, and then he remembered.

One night, quite some time ago, when he had been playing a game of billiards in the pool-room, he had idly listened to a discussion between some young men about trapping. Roy had been one of them. From trapping the discussion had drifted on to good trapping-grounds. Then it was that Roy had mentioned Swan Lake. He had stated that the country around that lake would make a good field for a trapping-line. The others had derided his statement. They had maintained that the country up around Swan Lake was too wild and broken for trapping. It would be almost impossible to lay out a trap-line there,

and anyhow the hardships involved in looking after the traps would be more than the catch was worth. And to give weight to their objections they had pointed out to Roy that few trappers, either white or red, had been known to go in there. And those who had, had never been known to show any inclination to return for another season. The objectors further pointed out that there were no trading-posts nor Indian reserves within a hundred miles of Swan Lake, so it would mean that whoever was fool enough to go in there would have to live as a hermit for the whole of the season, practically cut off from the rest of the world.

But Roy had stuck doggedly to his guns. He had declared that he had been up to Swan Lake on a hunting trip, and that he had looked the country over. He had found ample signs to prove that the district was rich in fur-bearing animals, and he claimed firmly that anybody could establish a trap-line there without finding any unsurmountable obstacles. Those who stated otherwise were merely a bunch of lazy idlers who were afraid to tackle a man-sized job. And that the country up there was lonely was one point more in its favour, he maintained. A man would have the whole of the district to himself, without having anyone to bother him. He could lay out his trap-line free and wide, wherever the fancy took him, without getting tangled up with other lines. And Roy had finished his argument by declaring that if ever he took into his head to go out trapping again, he would certainly hike for Swan Lake.

Swan Lake. That was in all probability the place Roy had headed for, reflected Williams, an eager glint in his eyes. He had again resumed his walking. Half sub-consciously he had noted that passers-by had eyed him curiously as he stood in frowning thought on the edge of the sidewalk. So mechanically he had begun to move slowly towards the pool-room.

He had been to Swan Lake himself twice during patrols, and as he visualized in his mind the country surrounding the lake, he could easily understand that any person who wanted to drop from public view for a while would choose that region. The country was seamed with high, steep, spruce-clad hills, and scarred with uncountable ravines, draws and valleys. A rough, wild region, shunned by all but occasional hunters. Just the sort of place which would suggest itself to a fugitive going into hiding.

The corporal thought he understood Roy's scheme. In all probability the latter had some friend in town who was to keep a watchful eye on events. Perhaps this friend knew the reason for Roy's interest in what was stirring in town, and perhaps he didn't. But that was immaterial. Most likely they had arranged that this friend was to go up to Roy's hiding-place some time during the winter or early spring, to tell Roy what was going on, and Roy would then arrange his further steps according to the report. If Roy seemed to have avoided suspicion, good and well. He would probably then return openly to town. But if he heard that the police were closing in on him, he would probably either try to sneak out of the Dominion into the States, or else he might decide to stay in hiding for a while.

Corporal Williams nodded his head emphatically. He felt certain that he had read correctly the riddle of Roy's whereabouts and his intentions.

He was just on the point of entering the pool-room when he paused and hesitated. He reflected that even if he found any of Roy's friends, he would probably get nothing out of them. On the other hand, Roy's potential confidant would certainly hear about his inquiries, and might go straight out to Roy and tell him that the police were already on his trail. And the corporal particularly did not want that to happen.

He turned abruptly on his heel, and strode quickly in the direction of the barracks.

When he entered the office, Inspector Weston looked up quickly.

"Well, Corporal, did you find out anything of interest?" he asked.

"Yes, sir," answered Williams. "Roy Bancroft was in town yesterday, and he left yesterday afternoon for the North."

"What time did he leave?"

"Officially he left some time around five o'clock, sir. But I suspect that was only a blind. I suppose he cached his canoe somewhere, then sneaked back to town and lay in wait for Sergeant Ware. After he had killed the sergeant he slipped back to his canoe and continued up the river. At least, that's my theory, sir."

"Who told you he left around five?" asked the inspector.

"Miss Bancroft, sir. I first went around to Mr. Tyson's office and inquired for Bancroft there. Mr. Crane told me he hadn't seen Bancroft since yesterday afternoon, and said I should probably find him at home. I at once went over there, and Miss Bancroft told me Roy had left yesterday afternoon. He had gone up into the woods on a trapping expedition. At least, that's what he had told her."

"I hope you didn't tell Miss Bancroft why we were interested in Roy's movements?" asked Weston quickly, looking up at the corporal with a slight frown.

"I'm afraid I did, sir," confessed the corporal miserably. Weston snapped upright in his chair.

"The deuce you did!" he barked angrily, scowling at Williams with undisguised displeasure. "What on earth possessed you to do that? Really, Corporal, I thought you had more sense!"

"I couldn't help myself, sir," protested the harassed

corporal. "Miss Bancroft practically forced the information from me." And he gave a brief outline of what had occurred during his interview with Joan Bancroft.

"I see," commented the inspector when the corporal had finished his story. "You couldn't very well help yourself under the circumstances, so I can't blame you. But it's very awkward. Deuced awkward, in fact. I'll have to . . . However that must wait. Let me have your further report. Did you get any clue to Bancroft's present whereabouts, or his destination?"

"No, sir. But I think I know where he can be found."

He gave the inspector a short, concise account of his movements and observations after he had left Joan Bancroft, and also stated his reasons for assuming that Roy had gone up to Swan Lake.

The inspector thought deeply for a while after Williams had finished.

"I shouldn't be surprised if you are right," he said finally. "At least it sounds plausible. As you say, if young Bancroft had contemplated a rapid exit, he would certainly have taken the lighter canoe. Anyhow, it will be worth while to have a look around up at Swan Lake. You have been there before, I believe?"

"Yes, sir. Twice on patrol."

"Good. You'd better start up there as soon as you can. And even if Bancroft is actually heading for some other locality, you may pick up some information about him along the rivers. We want to get hold of him as soon as we possibly can, and question him. And I agree with you that it would only be a waste of time to try to pump his friends. With all their faults, the people up here certainly carry loyalty towards a friend to a fine point. I'll have to give them credit for that. When can you be ready to start?"

"This afternoon, sir."

"Very well." Weston rose from his chair and reached

for his hat. "You go ahead with your preparations. Tell Douglas to take charge here. I shall probably not be back till this afternoon. I've some business to attend to." And he hurriedly left the office.

It was shortly after three o'clock when he returned. When he asked for Corporal Williams he met with a surprise.

"The corporal has left, sir," announced Douglas.

"What! Left already?" exclaimed Weston with a frown. "Dash it all! I wanted to see him before he pulled out. There were a few things I wanted to discuss with him."

"The corporal seemed to be under the impression that you had given him your final instructions, sir," volunteered Douglas. "He wanted to make an early start, as he hoped to overtake Bancroft on the river."

"I see," remarked Weston. "Did he take a guide along with him?"

"No, sir, he went alone."

"H'm," grunted the inspector, but he frowned thoughtfully as he walked across to his own desk.

CHAPTER IX

PORTAGE BEND REVELS IN SURMISE AND GOSSIP

PORTAGE BEND was seething with excitement. This second murder within a comparatively short space of time had come as a stunning shock to the townspeople. They felt awed and cowed at the thought that evidently some ruthless, blood-thirsty fiend was stalking around amongst them. But the first effect of the shock soon wore off, and they began greedily to grope around for details. Of course the movements of the police were watched closely and jealously, and not many hours had passed before the whole town knew that Corporal Williams had made inquiries about Roy Bancroft.

Whispers began to fly around that Roy must be connected with the crime. At first these whispers were reserved and cautious; but they quickly gained momentum, and it was not long before it was boldly and freely pronounced that Roy was the murderer. The fact that the corporal departed in the early afternoon for the North materially strengthened this conviction. Roy was missing from town. They had early ascertained that fact, and the prevailing theory was that the police must have got some tip about the direction taken by the fugitive, and that the corporal had set off in pursuit.

Some enterprising souls even approached members of the police detachment in their quest for information, but they retired in confusion. The attitude of the police had

been short, disturbingly short. Instead of gaining the anticipated information, the earnest inquirers had been treated to the free and gratis advice to run along and mind their own business.

And the female element of the town was as active as the male. Old enmity and differences were pushed in the background and almost forgotten in the general excitement. Mrs. Jarvis and Mrs. Jenkins, who had not been on speaking or nodding terms for the best part of a year or more, were animatedly and amiably discussing the all-absorbing topic that same afternoon in Simpson's store, seriously impeding the normal course of traffic for almost a full hour. Husbands, children, meals and homes were neglected and almost forgotten in the clamouring exigencies of the moment. The ladies of the town dived in and out of each other's houses like so many homing rabbits, greedy for any scrap of information.

But information was sparse. However, they enlarged and embroidered on the few rags they had at their disposal with enthusiasm and ingenuity. All agreed that they were not at all surprised to hear that Roy Bancroft was a murderer. They were almost unanimous in stating that down in their hearts they had always felt that he would come to a bad end some day!

Quite a few acrimonious remarks were passed on the reticence of the police. They all felt that as servants of the public the police were in duty bound to impart to the community in general whatever information they possessed.

It was Mrs. Horton who suddenly remembered that there were other channels of information than those the police controlled. Mrs. Horton was the leader of the set comprising the most earnest inquirers in town. She always spoke emphatically and with authority on any subject going. She was a lady of imagination and resource, and if data were missing she coined a few as she went along.

In the afternoon of the day Sergeant Ware's body had been found she was presiding at an impromptu tea-party, consisting of a crowd of her closest cronies, and it was then she had her brilliant inspiration.

The fugitive murderer had a sister in town, her active mind reflected, and if any person was posted in the stirring matters it certainly must be she. If one called on her, and subjected her to some adroit questioning, one should certainly be able to gather quite a lot of useful, first-hand information. Only Mrs. Horton did not give quite that sense to her scheme when she unfolded it to her cronies. She always prided herself on her tact.

"Listen, my dears," was what she actually said. "It just occurred to me that that poor child, Joan Bancroft, is left all alone with all these terrible troubles hanging over her. I think I'll run along and see her. The dear child certainly needs sympathy and a few kind words in her hour of trial and distress. I will run along now and see if there is anything I can do for her."

There was a general murmur of concurrence from her friends, and they all volunteered to go with her on her mission of mercy. But Mrs. Horton declined their kind offer. She maintained that "the poor girl" would not want to see a big crowd just at present. But perhaps it would be just as well to take one or two ladies along with her, conceded Mrs. Horton, to show Joan that the sympathy with her in her distress was universal.

Her friends saw the justice of the point, and it was finally decided that Mrs. Horton and two other ladies were to form the committee, while the rest were to await their return so they could hear how the distressed young girl was bearing up under the blow she had sustained.

The small party set out, all glowing with the agreeable, warm sensation of having embarked on a mission of kindness and charity.

They returned to their waiting friends much sooner

than could be reasonably expected, looking somewhat ruffled and short of temper. They all bore the appearance of having been cheated and victimized.

They confessed that their expedition had been a complete failure. They had not been able to find Joan Bancroft.

"We tried both the front and the back door, my dears," explained Mrs. Horton in a bitter, deprecating tone of voice. "But they both remained shut in our faces. I feel quite certain that Miss Bancroft was in, and that she simply refused to let us in. Well, if she feels she can afford to repulse our friendly advances, I shall certainly not waste my sympathy where it evidently isn't wanted," she ended with a determined, disdainful sniff.

Her friends were quite in accord with her. They promptly transferred their sympathy from Joan to Mrs. Horton in concerted murmurs. They all condemned and deplored Joan's attitude. How a girl in her unenviable, questionable position could afford to rebuff their friendly overtures completely passed their comprehension. And they all said so.

Mrs. Horton and her coterie did not soften at all in their feelings for Joan Bancroft when they learnt, on the following day, that Joan had actually been away from her home when the mission of Good Samaritans had made their unsuccessful call. Their resentment against her actually increased when they heard that the young girl had found refuge for the time being with Betty Weston, the inspector's wife. They felt something like having been robbed of their due rights. Because, as long as Joan remained under the Weston roof-tree, they knew it would be futile to gladden her heart with visits of cheer and sympathy.

Betty Weston had a way of her own of dealing with inopportune callers and earnest seekers of information, which was disconcerting to those who experienced it. She

was always punctiliously polite, courteous, and smiling on such occasions, but even so the venturesome ones left her presence with heightened colour in their cheeks and tightly compressed lips. Mrs. Horton and quite a few of her closest friends knew all about that from past, first-hand experience, so with considerable annoyance and irritation, they had to decide that they were forced to forgo the pleasure of making Joan the object of their organized sympathy and commiseration.

But Mrs. Horton's active brains soon discovered a fresh angle in the situation which she found far too important to keep to herself.

"You know, my dears," she addressed her followers, who were eagerly awaiting the words of wisdom about to drop from her lips, "Westons would hardly take the sister of a murderer into their home if they didn't have some purpose behind it. I shouldn't be at all surprised if the police suspect her of knowing more about the whole business than she should, and that Westons have her at their house to keep her under strict observation. Of course, as you know, I'm the last person in the world who would cast unjust aspersions on any person, but somehow I feel I'm right."

Her audience chorused their unqualified agreement with her reasoning. They all voiced the opinion that Joan Bancroft was not a bit better than she should be, considering the brother she had!

But Joan's own attitude rather tended to contradict their verdict. She was soon frequently seen walking out with Mrs. Weston, and she certainly did not look as a suspected criminal under police surveillance. Nor did Mrs. Weston have the appearance of being a jailer. In fact, to the eyes of even the closest observer it certainly appeared as if there were the most friendly relations and understanding between the two. They chatted amicably together, and Joan frequently smiled at some of Mrs. Weston's remarks.

Joan kept her head high, and met the many curious glances directed towards her with perfect equanimity and imperturbable calm.

At least Mrs. Horton was irritated by her manner when Joan appeared in public, and she lost no time in voicing her censure to her cronies :

" I really think that Bancroft girl ought to show a little more meekness and humility," she declared testily. " She strides along the streets as haughtily and proudly as if nothing was the matter. Her attitude is actually indecent for the sister of a murderer. But then I always saw a hard streak in that girl. Anyhow, I've completely lost patience with her. I don't think she will be quite so proud when Corporal Williams brings her brother back in handcuffs, and puts him in a cell! " she ended, arching her neck while her several chins rippled down to her ample bosom, and fairly quivered with indignation and determination.

But Corporal Williams seemed to take his time about bringing in Roy Bancroft, and the townspeople were beginning to feel impatience. They had discussed past events till they were beginning to be stale and somewhat threadbare, and they wanted fresh food for excitement.

Shortly after the corporal had left the rumour had begun to circulate around town that Roy Bancroft's tobacco-pouch had been found on the scene of murder. The rumour created a certain sensation for a while, but the citizens soon lost interest in it. After all, it merely confirmed their preconceived conviction of Roy's guilt, and didn't add any particular interest to the situation. The only thing which could revive their excitement, which had begun to flag a little, would be the return of Roy Bancroft himself as a prisoner.

When Inspector Weston heard about the rumour going the rounds of the town he frowned, and he at once summoned the remaining three members of the detach-

ment to his office. He had a brief talk with them, and after they had left he sat for a few moments deep in thought. Finally he reached for the telephone instrument on his desk, and with a grim smile on his lips he put through a long-distance call for headquarters of "F" Division in Prince Albert. When he had got the superintendent on the line he held a lengthy, earnest conversation with the latter, and there was an expression of satisfaction on his face when he hung up the receiver.

The townspeople waited eagerly and impatiently for Corporal Williams's return. But week followed week without any sign of the absentee. The crews of the canoes coming down from the North were closely and eagerly questioned, but none of them could give the slightest scrap of information. Not a soul seemed to have seen either the corporal or Bancroft. They both seemed to have vanished completely off the surface of the earth.

Ugly rumours again began to fly around the town. The belief was generally postulated that Roy Bancroft had disposed of the corporal in the same way as he had disposed of Sergeant Ware. The police were again approached with a view of obtaining their opinion of this fresh theory, but the police resolutely refused to be dragged into any discussion whatsoever.

But nevertheless a certain amount of uneasiness made itself felt around the barracks as the days gradually grew colder, and the nights were becoming nippy with the first frost.

"I can't understand what's keeping the corporal," exclaimed Inspector Weston one day to Constable Douglas. There was a frown of uneasiness on his face. "He ought to have been here long before now. If he doesn't return within a couple of weeks, he'll be trapped up there by the freeze-up. I hope nothing has happened to him."

"I hardly think so, sir. The corporal is an excellent

canoeist, and he's careful at that," volunteered Douglas.

"And he knows the north country well, sir."

"Yes, I know. But I can't at all understand why he hasn't returned yet," grumbled Weston. "I wish he would get a move on, or else freeze-up will beat him to it!"

But freeze-up clamped down on the country and began to bind the lakes and rivers in its icy fetters, the first flurry of snow whirled through the air, and still there was no sign of the missing corporal.

Weston was walking around with a perpetual look of worry on his face, and there was an atmosphere of depression around the barracks.

As soon as the winter trails were reported safe for traffic the inspector dispatched Constable Douglas and the half-breed guide of the detachment, Alec Chaboye, to try to locate the missing men. Douglas and Chaboye took one sleigh and a team of seven strong dogs. They had orders to travel fast, and to search every part of the Swan Lake district for traces of the corporal and Roy Bancroft even if it should take them months.

When they had departed there was nothing to do but await their return with as much patience as the worried members of the detachment could muster.

Then one morning, barely three weeks after the relief expedition had left, Portage Bend awoke to a fresh sensation. The report spread like wild-fire that on the preceding night Constable Douglas and Alec Chaboye had returned, bringing back with them Corporal Williams and Roy Bancroft!

Evidently one of the men from town, who for reasons of his own had defied the freezing temperature of the winter night, had seen two sleighs pull up in front of the barracks at a late hour. And he had discovered to his surprise that the late travellers were Douglas, Chaboye, Corporal Williams, and Roy Bancroft. Something had

obviously been wrong. Corporal Williams had been riding in one of the sleighs, and his right arm had' been carried in a sling.

The nocturnal observer had no opportunity to ask any questions, as the corporal, Douglas, and Roy Bancroft had hurriedly entered the barracks, and the two dog-teams had driven away before he got up to them.

As soon as this rumour got headway there was quite a stampede for the police barracks by men who had little or no business of their own to attend to, and who therefore were willing and eager to take a hand in other people's affairs. A few of the most determined boldly entered the front office. Even if they obtained no information, they would, at least, have the gratification of seeing Roy Bancroft occupying one of the steel lattice cells, they told themselves with anticipation and relish.

But they were doomed to disappointment. They found the front office deserted except for Curly Wentworth. Both the cells were quite empty!

Wentworth, who was seated at the desk in front of the window, received the excited intruders with a broad grin and an airy wave of his hand.

"Too late, gentlemen," he announced cheerfully. "The birds have flown the roost. And seeing we have finished our little chat, would you mind closing the door tightly behind you when you are outside."

"But, say! We want to . . ." began a protesting voice, but Curly interrupted the speaker heartlessly.

"What you want is to go chase yourself," he announced brutally. "And if you don't buzz off pretty speedily, I'll run the whole bunch of you in for loitering on Government property. And close that door! I don't want the whole of the arctic winter in here."

The invaders realized the grim, determined purpose underlying Curly Wentworth's banter, and retired sullenly. The last man out slammed the door behind him with a

vicious "BANG!" which caused Curly's grin to widen several inches.

Once outside the barracks one of the crowd suggested to find the fellow who had witnessed the return of the relief expedition. This suggestion was eagerly pounced on by the others, and they set off. They soon caught their quarry, and carried him off to the pool-room. And the latter was not a bit averse to being carried off. Far from it. Normally he was merely a town loafer in whom nobody took any interest at all, and he swelled with pride at suddenly finding himself elevated to the prominence of a Person of Importance.

He answered the eager questions hurled at him with the deliberate, ponderous slowness the occasion warranted. But the sum total of his information was rather barren, and not very constructive.

Yes, Corporal Williams was hurt, he answered. Carried his right arm in a sling. Guess he and Bancroft had been scrapping it out, he volunteered. No, Bancroft had not been handcuffed. He had seen them all plainly in the light of the electric lamp over the door to the barracks, and he should have noticed if he had been, was his answer to one question.

This created a sensation.

"Do you mean to say he wasn't tied up nor nothin'?" asked one voice, incredulity in its tone.

"Nope. He was just as free as you'n me," answered the oracle.

"Holy smokes! That's no way to treat a murderer!" spoke up another voice with considerable heat. "Ain't them Mounties got more sense 'an that? But I guess he was pounced upon an' shoved into a cell as soon as they arrove?" suggested the owner of the voice, looking expectantly at the man in the know.

"Well, I don't know what they did to him when they got him inside the barracks. But I can tell you this, that

when the sleighs pulled up in front of the door, the fellows inside came peltin' out, an' they started shakin' han's all aroun', an' Bancroft came in for his slice o' it. They even patted him on the back. As far as I could see they received him as a long-lost brother. It looked more like a joy-feast than bringin' in a murderer."

"Now that's the police for you!" declared one man bitterly. "If honest citizens call aroun' to ask a' innocent question or two, they's treated as criminals; but if a red-hot murderer is brought in, they treat him like a prince come to town. Makes a guy fed up!"

"But, say, why didn't you go right in an' see what they did to Bancroft after they got him inside?" asked another.

"Just 'cause I ain't buttin' in on that crowd more'n I can help," was the rather emphatic answer. "I tried to get hol' o' that breed, Chaboye, an' the Injun drivin' the other team, but they was too quick for me an' had streaked off with their dog-trains before I got up to 'em."

"Say! Bancroft wasn't in any o' them cells when we was in there," spoke up one of the men who had invaded the barracks. "Wonder where they's keepin' him?"

"Guess they have him in the barrack-room, playin' poker," postulated one fellow sarcastically. "I reckon they was plumb afraid he might feel lonesome in one o' the cells."

"But say, fellows, what did that fellow Wentworth mean by sayin' the birds have flown the roost?" asked another who had been doing some quiet thinking.

"Guess he was only funnin'," answered somebody in the crowd.

But almost at that moment they got proof positive that Wentworth had not been "funnin'" or anything of the sort. A train-man, who had just come off duty at the depot, hurriedly entered the pool-room which, incidentally,

was also the clearing-house for any news which trickled into the town.

"Say, fellows!" cried the new-comer, almost before he had closed the door behind him, and swelling with importance. "Young Bancroft was taken down to Prince Albert early this mornin' on that gasolene jigger the police keeps up at the depot."

The crowd in the pool-room immediately swarmed around the train-man, vociferously and greedily clamouring for details.

"He left just aroun' daybreak," began the train-man, pleased with the sensation he had created. "Corporal Williams, Wentworth, Wrenn an' Bancroft came along to the depot, an' put the jigger on the rails. I walked up to 'em an' asked where they was goin'."

"'Down to the Junction,' answered the corporal, a little short-like.

"'Dam' col' travellin' on an open jigger this time o' the year,' I said to draw 'em out.

"'It'll hardly kill us,' said the corporal with a grin. 'We are well wrapped up, as you see.'

"They sure was wrapped well up in furs all o' 'em, 'cept Wentworth, who was just down to see 'em off. I noticed the corporal's right sleeve was empty, so I guessed he was carryin' that arm in a sling.

"'What you done to your arm, Corporal?' asks I.

"'Busted my collar-bone,' says he. 'An' before I could ask any more questions they was all aboard, an' had pulled out. All barrin' Wentworth, that is. Wrenn was drivin' the jigger. I tried to get some information out o' Wentworth, but he was as close as a dead musk-rat. All he did was to wish me 'Good mornin',' an' then he walked quickly away from the depot."

"But how do you know they was goin' to Prince Albert?" asked a voice. "The corporal only said they was goin' to the Junction."

"Well, just as the jigger pulled out Wentworth shouted after 'em:

" 'Say, Bancroft! When you get to P.A. don't you start makin' eyes at my best girl, or there will be trouble! ' "

"Gosh! That was a poor joke to spring on a fellow goin' to jail," commented one man in a virtuous tone of voice. "What did Bancroft say to that? "

"Nothin'. He just put one han' to his nose an' wig-wagged to Wentworth, grinnin' all over."

"How could he put one han' to his nose? " asked someone in the crowd quickly. "Wasn't he han'cuffed? "

"No-ope," answered the train-man slowly. He sounded as if he wished he could tell them that Bancroft had been handcuffed. Probably he felt that the fact would have given more dramatic force to his tale. "His wrists was just as bare o' bracelets as my own."

"Well, if that dam' police ain't the limit! " exploded a voice wrathfully. "Ain't those fellows got more sense 'an to let a dam' murderer run aroun' loose? Guess it means nothin' to them if he breaks away from 'em an' comes back an' murders the lot o' us," he ended bitterly.

"But, say, how did Bancroft take his arrest? " broke in another.

"Seemed quite happy about it, far as I could see. They was all o' 'em laughin' an' jokin' when they got to the depot, though they kinder closed up an' got quiet when I came up to 'em. The only one who didn't seem quite pleased with the world was the corporal. But I guess his arm was botherin' him."

"Well, don't that beat everything! " exclaimed one gentleman in the crowd. "That young Bancroft must sure be more hardboiled than I ever thought when he can take it like that." And there was a general murmur to the effect that the others considered the point well taken.

"But why did they rush Bancroft away in such a

hurry? " inquired a man who had done some heavy brain-work. " Why couldn't they have waited for the train to-morrow? "

" Say, you ain't got much head-fillin' if you can't see that," spoke up another gentleman rather pompously. " Can't you see? The police knew dam' well that we was all pretty much het up over these killin's here in town, an' I reckon they was afraid we might take care o' that murderin' coyote ourselves, so that he couldn't do no more mischief in this world. An' so they hustled him off before we had a chance to start anything."

This explanation emphatically appealed to the vanity of the crowd, and they all declared that that was exactly why the police had acted as they did. They even went further, and hinted darkly that the police had been wise in acting as promptly as they had, or else it wouldn't have been long before they had Bancroft out of the barracks and strung up to the nearest and most convenient tree. They one and all boldly declared that it had been in their mind all along to suggest a lynching bee, with Roy Bancroft taking the leading part, as it were.

They swaggered around, inflated with self-importance, and proclaimed loudly that the police knew dam' well they were not a crowd of men to trifle with! If they hadn't hustled Bancroft away so promptly things would sure have broken quickly around this town!

But in their hearts they all knew they were merely bluffing, and that their bold statements had not the slightest foundation in fact. But it was an agreeable feeling to pose as a dare-devil once in a while, though it was only posing.

There was a lot of speculation as to how Joan Bancroft would take this new development. Especially among the ladies of the town. The prevailing opinion was that her proud, defiant spirit must surely be broken now when her brother had been arrested as a murderer. And the majority

of the good ladies hoped that she would have enough delicacy of feeling to stay indoors for the time being, and not parade her shame in public.

But evidently Joan Bancroft did not possess any pronounced delicacy of feeling. Around the shopping hour that same forenoon she was seen walking down Main Street with Mrs. Weston, looking as proud and unconcerned as ever. She completely ignored the disapproving, censorious stares directed towards her. She walked along as serenely and undisturbed as if nothing had happened.

The virtuous ladies of the town felt outraged and scandalized, and they criticized Joan's deplorable conduct in no uncertain terms. Mrs. Weston also came in for her share of censure. The latter really ought to have more regard for the proprieties than to parade the sister of an arrested murderer down the street as if she were a respectable member of society, was the comment of several good souls. And they underlined their comments with aggressive, disdainful sniffs.

Also was the attitude of the police severely criticized and deplored. They resolutely refused to give any information to the starving public. And the general opinion was that the police were not treating the townspeople right. Not right at all!

CHAPTER X

WHAT HAPPENED TO CORPORAL WILLIAMS

CORPORAL WILLIAMS left Portage Bend in the hopeless mood of a man who is leaving the world behind him for good. The blow Fate had dealt him had been so cruel and conclusive that he was past caring much for anything. He had only one aim left: to find Roy Bancroft. That had become an obsession with him to the exclusion of almost every other consideration. And when he at last found Roy he knew what to do.

He felt bitter and morbid. He had even begun to feel aversion to human companionship. When he encountered a canoe on the river he passed quickly, with only a curt nod for the occupants' friendly greetings. If he discovered a camp on shore he pushed quickly past. He wanted to be alone. He was glad that in a few days he was to turn away from the main river, into tracts of country where he would hardly meet any human beings, and where there would be no trading-posts or settlements to avoid.

He was heading straight for Swan Lake without wasting any time on making inquiries for Roy. He had an unshaken conviction that he would find Roy somewhere in the Swan Lake country.

The weather was ideal for travelling on the rivers and lakes. The air was mild, and a light breeze from the south lightly rippled the surface of the water, and fanned

the tops of the tall spruces lining both banks of the river. And the clusters of foliage-bearing trees which had found a footing in between the dark green spruces were a riot of bright, gaudy, autumnal colours. It was Indian summer-time.

It was the sort of weather Williams had revelled in during canoe-trips in the past, but now he hardly noticed conditions around him except in a vague, subconscious way.

For the first few days he travelled fast. He hoped to be able to overtake Roy on the river. He wanted to cut his agony of mind as short as possible.

But he soon realized that Roy must either have more of a start than he thought, or else he must be pushing ahead fast and furiously. Probably the latter, reflected the corporal. Roy would certainly try to slip into the wilderness, away from the ken of men, as quickly as possible.

As soon as the corporal realized this, he checked his first frantic speed. But he pushed doggedly on and made good time nevertheless.

He had soon left the wide, calm Saskatchewan River behind him, and was guiding his canoe up the water-courses leading to Swan Lake. The country began to become more hilly and broken, and he frequently encountered rapids. He poled up some, and portaged his canoe and outfit around others which were too rough and turbulent to force. But through it all he worked automatically, like a man in a dream. He had got to the stage of mind where nothing mattered any more except that one set purpose: to find Roy Bancroft.

But on the fifth day after he had left the broad Saskatchewan, he received a rude jolt which shook him out of his mental lethargy.

Around noon of that day he entered a long, narrow lake, surrounded on all sides by low, spruce-clad ridges.

He gazed around him with knitted brows. The lake seemed familiar, disturbingly familiar. And suddenly the realization flashed into his mind that his dulled wits had played him a ghastly, cruel trick. This was Otter Lake. He recognized it now. He was almost fifty miles out of his course!

He cursed himself long and bitterly when he had at last grasped the full truth. He had been brooding too much on other matters, and had not paid enough attention to the landmarks, which were often vague and confusing up here in the vast, virgin forest. And now much valuable time would be lost. He must get to Roy before the rivers and lakes froze over, and the time was beginning to grow alarmingly short.

But he soon ceased his futile railings against himself and his own stupidity. He must decide what to do, and decide quickly. Every minute would count from now on.

He did not know anything about the country lying between Otter Lake and the watercourse leading up to Swan Lake. There might be some way to get back on his right course by working steadily westward through that country, along the creeks and rivers he would in all probability find. But it was risky. He might come to some unsurmountable impasse, and then he would be worse off than ever. Or he might get hopelessly lost in the maze of forest, rivers and lakes.

There was nothing for it but to return the way he had come, he decided finally, with a gloomy shake of his head. It would mean the loss of the best part of a week, but there was nothing else for it. He had a pretty fair idea where his blunder had occurred, now he gave the matter due consideration. He would have to try to make up for lost time somehow, though how it could be done was rather a problem. He did not dare take too many risks going down river again from Otter Lake. Turbulent,

angry rapids followed one after the other like beads on a string, and an accident now would utterly ruin his plans. He would have to exercise due caution in spite of the urge for hurry.

Having decided on his course, he resolutely nosed his canoe around, and soon the light craft was speeding swiftly down the river.

About a fortnight later the corporal's canoe at last passed into Swan Lake. The corporal himself felt tired and weary. He had hardly granted himself any rest or sleep since he had realized his ghastly mistake up on Otter Lake.

But in spite of his tiredness he was filled with a sense of elation. He had every reason for believing that his guess had been correct, and that Roy Bancroft was actually located somewhere in the country surrounding the lake. He had found traces of recent camps all along the water-course, temporary camps where some traveller had spent the night. And the ashes of the camp-fires had all been untouched by rain, while the empty tin-cans he had found at these camp-sites had all been new and shiny inside. No trace of rust could he find on any of them; a sure sign that they could not have lain there for long. And it was almost a certainty that the man who had occupied these camps was Roy Bancroft.

But though the corporal had reached Swan Lake, his difficulties were not over by far. He still had to locate Roy Bancroft's camp, and that was no easy task.

Swan Lake was more than thirty miles long, and averaged a width of from ten to fifteen miles. The entire lake was hemmed in by a jumbled mass of steep, frowning hills, clad with dark, towering spruce-trees. Splitting the hills like huge, ugly gashes were numerous deep, dark ravines, draws and valleys stretching down to the lake.

The dark, sombre hills and ridges cast heavy shadows on the calm surface of the water below, giving the lake a bleak, forbidding aspect. Only the centre of the lake

was bright, where the sun's rays played on the water and made it sparkle and glitter.

It was a wild, desolate region, grim and inhospitable. Even the smiling sun failed to soften its austere aspect. There was a brooding hush over the whole scene, which was only broken by the weird, melancholy cry from a loon somewhere out on the lake.

On the former occasions when the corporal had visited Swan Lake, he had found the wild scenery grand, almost majestic, in spite of its severity; but now the scene spreading before his eyes seemed sinister, malevolent, almost as if it were impregnated with a threat of evil, and he shuddered a little as if with cold, as his gaze swept over the country, and a heavy sense of depression stole over him.

Somewhere up here was Roy Bancroft, and he had to find him, and find him quickly. But how to find him in this labyrinth of draws and valleys? The corporal knew that the terrain in the immediate vicinity of the lake was wholly unsuitable for establishing a trap-line. Roy would have located his camp somewhere back in the hills. But where, and on which side of the lake? There were so many small rivers and creeks running down the valleys and draws into the lake, and a lot of those were navigable for canoes. Roy might have turned up any of them to get into the back country.

Slowly he let his gaze range around the tops of the hills. He hoped to see somewhere the tell-tale smoke from a camp rise into the air from the brush, smoke that would indicate the location of Roy's camp. But he looked in vain. The whole country looked deserted and desolate.

The corporal shook his head impatiently, and began to map out in his head a plan of campaign. The only thing to do, he decided, was to search each draw and valley systematically for signs. And he would climb to the top of every high ridge and spy for the smoke from

Roy's camp. It would take time, but it was the only sensible thing to do. And perhaps luck would be with him so he wouldn't have to grope around too long.

He scanned the sky above him with anxious eyes. The vault up there was still clear and blue, with only a few white dots of clouds drifting lazily over it; but how long would it last? The country was still basking in the deceptive Indian summer, which might lure the inexperienced into the false belief that winter was still far off. But the corporal knew better. He was fully aware that almost any day the fair, mild weather might break up into a sweeping, howling storm, and after that the frost would begin to take grip. And soon rivers and lakes would be blocked by ice for further passage of canoes. The corporal hoped and prayed fervently that he would have time for his search.

With feverish haste he set out on his quest. He decided to search the east side first. He remembered from his previous visits to the lake, that the country had seemed more open to the east than to the west. Consequently the former would in all probability commend itself to a person looking for trapping-ground.

Five days later around the noon hour the corporal was standing on the summit of a high ridge. He felt weary and discouraged. So far he had discovered no sign of Roy.

There was a steady throbbing in his head, and at times dark spots danced before his eyes. He was fast burning up his strength in his hectic race against time, but he never heeded the warnings. He had hardly had any rest or sleep since he arrived at Swan Lake. He drove relentlessly on as if he were spurred along by some power outside of and stronger than himself.

He looked apprehensively up towards the north-west. A jagged bank of blue-black clouds had begun to rise over the tops of the hills up there, looking like a serrated, dark,

frowning wall. It looked as if a storm was brewing up there. And if it should break before he had found Roy's camp . . . The corporal half shuddered when he contemplated that contingency.

He turned his eyes away and began to search the country before him through a pair of field-glasses. Slowly the glasses swept from east to north and onward to the west.

Suddenly the corporal's whole body grew tense, and the binoculars were held steady on a point up to the northeast. He thought he had seen a haze rise over the crest of the hills up there; but now those dark spots were again dancing before his eyes, and he could not see clearly.

He lowered the glasses and rubbed his eyes impatiently.

After a while he again lifted the binoculars to his eyes, and looked intently in the direction where he thought he had detected the haze. And as he looked all his doubts were dispelled. Suddenly a thin streamer of smoke shot into the air. Evidently somebody had just thrown fresh fuel on a fire. There was no doubt but there was a camp up there!

The corporal quickly pushed his glasses into their case, which hung suspended from his neck by a strap, and turned eagerly away. But suddenly he stopped, an expression of doubt and uneasiness on his face. He had just remembered that threatening cloud-bank up there in the north-west.

He turned and studied it with a heavy, thoughtful frown. It had risen considerably higher over the hills than when he had last looked at it. And now he also noticed that the soft breeze which had been blowing all morning had increased in strength and had grown considerably more chilly.

There was no doubt about it: a storm was approaching, and approaching fast.

What should he do? he asked himself quickly.

His canoe was down by a creek at the foot of the hill.

He had to paddle about three miles down that creek to get back to the lake. And once back on the lake he had to paddle up along the east bank and try to locate the stream leading up to the camp he had spotted. That might prove to be difficult. And if the storm should break while he was still on the lake he would be trapped. There would be only one thing to do then, when the gale hit the lake and turned it into a foaming mass of angry, turbulent waves: seek shelter and remain there till the storm blew itself out. And that might mean staying wind-bound for days. He had experienced storms before which had raged unabated for three and four days at a stretch.

Much better to strike out for the camp cross-country. As far as he could judge the distance would not be more than ten or twelve miles.

Of course it would mean a hard and difficult tramp through dense, almost impenetrable forest and brush. There would be streams and rivers to ford, and there would be hard climbs in and out of steep-walled draws and ravines. But it could be done, and it would be a surer way than going around by the lake. No gale could halt his progress, and he would have the smoke from the camp-fire to guide him to his goal.

His deliberations had only taken a few moments. As soon as his mind was made up he again turned down the slope and hurried as fast as he could go towards his canoe. He had to get his axe. He would need it, forcing a way through the heavy brush he knew he would encounter.

As soon as he had got back to his canoe he began to wrap all his supplies and outfit up in a tarpaulin with frantic haste, and after he cached it all up in a convenient tree.

When he had finished he looked up at his cache with a grim smile. Now what had made him go to all that trouble? he asked himself. Force of habit, most likely, he answered his own question. What mattered what

happened to his supplies? Nothing at all mattered any more.

With a shrug of his shoulders he picked up his axe, and struck rapidly out for the north-east.

He had not over-estimated the difficulties in his path. He frequently encountered brush so thick and dense that he literally had to chop his way through foot by foot. Often the walls leading into gorges and ravines were so precipitous that he had to lower himself down slowly, hanging on with toes and fingers to cracks in the rocks, when a false step or a slip would send his body hurling down to the rocks and brush far below.

There were streams and rivers to ford. Many of them were shallow; but others were so deep that he had to wade in water to above his hips, and some he actually had to swim. And at times he met such heavy obstacles that he had to make long detours to get around them.

But he kept doggedly on. His face and hands were scratched and bleeding where sharp, jutting twigs and brush had torn them, and his clothing was ripped in several places. His heart was racing within him, his breath came in laboured gasps, and the blood was pounding against his temples. But he steadily worked nearer and nearer towards his objective. And he was quite convinced that at the end of his trail he would find Roy Bancroft.

He had failed to detect any smoke from his last points of observation, but he found it easy to furnish the explanation. In all probability the smoke he had seen rise from the camp earlier was from the cooking-fire, when the occupant of the camp was preparing his noonday meal. The disappearance of the smoke did not bother the corporal at all. He had picked out landmarks which would lead him straight to the camp.

The storm was rapidly approaching. Gusts of wind hissed with an angry whine through the tree-tops above

him, and the clouds were fast rolling up, gradually obliterating the sun. Down among the densely spaced spruce-trees it was gradually getting darker and darker.

From high ground the corporal could see streaks of lightning zigzagging down the dark wall of clouds up in the north-west, while the crash of thunder came rolling down to him over the darkened hills. As yet it was quite some distance away, but it was drawing steadily nearer.

Some time later, as he crossed the back of a high ridge, he saw again smoke rising from the camp ahead of him. It could not be more than a couple of miles away. As far as he could see only two or three ridges more lay between him and it.

With revived energy he plunged down the incline into the darkened draw below him. But now the tempest broke over him. It was heralded by a screeching, howling blast of wind, which swept madly through the forest, and even stout old trees had to bend before its furious onslaught. Blast after blast followed, and the tall, heavy spruces swayed and creaked, while their broad branches flopped and waved in the wind as wings of huge birds.

The lightning flashed and crackled almost incessantly, and split the gathering dusk with its yellowish-green, eerie light, while ear-splitting, deafening claps of thunder shook the hills.

But the corporal kept steadily on. He felt his strength was fast ebbing out; but the conviction that he would soon be up to the camp kept him going. He was comparatively well sheltered from the raging, howling gale down among the tall timber. It was only when he crossed some ridge, where the trees stood more scattered, that the wind got hold, and then he had to bend low to force his way against it.

At last he began struggling up the slope of what he felt certain would be the last ridge between him and the

camp. At least so it had appeared to him from another ridge farther back.

But now the storm was at its height. The flashes and crackle of the lightning blended with the reverberating clashes of thunder. The gale shrieked through the trees, and the tall spruces swayed so perilously that it looked as if they were going to topple over any moment. From the depths of the woods came rending crashes of limbs being ripped from the trunks of the trees by the mad, unleashed fury of the wind. The whole nature was a seething, madly boiling witches' cauldron. There was a wild, clamouring uproar as if all the demons of the nether regions had been let loose.

The corporal fought his weary way up the hill. His feet were beginning to feel as heavy as lead, and he found it hard to breathe. It seemed to him that he had been wandering through the woods for ages.

Suddenly there was a blinding flash, and the crash of splitting timber right beside him. Instinctively he closed his eyes and ducked. He heard a tearing, splitting crash as if the whole forest was being rent asunder, then a heavy, dark load hurled itself on his back, carrying him with it to the ground. He felt a stabbing, burning pain in his right shoulder as he fell, streaks of light shot through his throbbing head, then darkness engulfed him. . . .

When the corporal at last painfully fought his way back to consciousness, he found himself lying face down on the ground. All seemed to be dark around him, and a torrent of rain was mercilessly pouring down over his back.

For a while he lay quite still while his numbed, aching brains struggled to realize where he was and what had happened.

Then with a start he remembered, and he made a sudden movement to raise himself from the ground, but with a sob of pain he sank back, half fainting, his head splitting with sickening nausea. Some heavy weight was pressing

on his shoulders, pinning him down, and a stabbing, shooting pain shot through his right shoulder at the slightest move.

For a while he lay still, fighting an attack of vertigo which threatened to hurl him back into unconsciousness once more.

But gradually the spasm passed, and he decided to try to take stock of the situation. Slowly and painfully he began to twist his head over to the right. The slightest move seemed to start thousands of red-hot needles jabbing into his shoulder, but he gritted his teeth and persevered.

At last he got a glimpse out of the corner of his right eye of the object which was pressing him down. The thick, heavy limb of a tree was lying diagonally over his shoulders.

He tried to wriggle away from it, but at his first movement an excruciating stab of pain shot through his damaged shoulder, forcing a moan out between his tightly clenched teeth.

Again he lay motionless for a time, and the nagging, burning pain in his shoulder seemed to abate a little.

After a while he again squinted up at the branch. He *must* free himself, he thought frantically. He had still his mission to fulfil.

Gradually his mind cleared, and he was able to think more coherently. He understood what had happened. Either an lightning or the gale had wrenched that limb from a nearby tree, and had hurled it crashing over him.

He carefully studied the position of the timber which held him prisoner. The way it was lying he might be able to reach it with his free left hand, so that he could push it far enough to one side to be clear of it.

Gingerly and cautiously he began to swing his left arm up and forward, while he strove to keep the remainder of his body rigid. At last the finger-tips of his hand touched the branch.

He drew a long breath, clenched his teeth, and tensed himself for one supreme, frantic effort to free himself. Suddenly he gave his body one sharp twist, while at the same time his left arm shot out against the branch with all its force behind it.

The quick movement wrung a sharp cry of agony from him, a myriad of lights danced and sparkled before his eyes, and he was struggling fiercely against a violent attack of dizziness which threatened to overpower him.

For a while he lay panting and groaning on the ground, half unconscious; but gradually the spasm of dizziness passed and his mind cleared. He tried to move his body, and with a gasp of relief he realized that he was free.

Carefully and slowly he turned over on his back, but for a while he made no effort to get up. He felt so utterly weary and exhausted, and it was so good to rest. He did not mind the rain which beat down on him; it merely helped to cool his feverish head and body.

After a while he struggled into a sitting posture. He must get on his way, he told himself dully. His right arm was hanging useless at his side. The shoulder must be broken, he mused. It burnt and ached even at the slightest movement of his body. With his left hand he tucked his right into the gap between two buttons on his tunic. The lower button supported part of the weight of the arm, and it seemed to relieve the pressure on his shoulder.

In a detached way he noticed that the storm had swept past him and was continuing its angry, raging course towards the south-west. He could still see flashes of lightning splitting the dark sky down there, but the roll of the thunder only came faintly to him. The gale also seemed to have spent much of its fury, though it still growled fiercely and menacingly through the trees.

At last he struggled to his feet. But how hard it was to get up. It was as if some unseen force wanted to press him back down again. And what was the matter with his

head? It seemed as if a hundred hammers were beating away in there.

He stood swaying unsteadily, while he brushed his sound hand over his face. The hammers seemed to increase their activities more and more inside his head, and it was so hard to remember things. The queer feeling took possession of him that he had entered into another existence. His past life appeared to him as a distant half-forgotten dream.

What was it he wanted to do? Oh, yes. Find Roy Bancroft. Find him at once. He had something important to say to him. And Roy was somewhere around here. In a camp, he remembered. But where was that camp? He knew he had been heading for it in that dim, distant past, but in which direction had he been going? He shook his head impatiently, while he tried to think. Oh, yes, he remembered now. He had been walking up this slope, so he must continue that way.

Stumblingly he reeled upwards like a drunken man. Occasionally he tottered, and everything threatened to go blank around him. But each time he shook his head determinedly, and fought his way back to consciousness.

His breath was coming in laboured gasps as he struggled upwards, and big beads of perspiration gathered on his brow and mingled with the rain which was streaming down his face. His feet felt leaden, and several times he tottered and nearly fell, but each time he fought desperately to keep his balance. Subconsciously he felt that if he went down he would be unable to struggle up again.

He had lost his hat and his axe down where the accident occurred, but in the muddled state of his mind he had never thought of groping around for them in the dark. It is a question whether he had thought of them at all. Luckily the undergrowth was not so dense here on the slope, so he could force his way through without an axe. But in the darkness he often ran into trees with sharp twigs sticking out like thorns. They added fresh, bleeding scratches to

his hands and face, and fresh rents in his already heavily punished tunic and breeches. But he was hardly aware of the fact. He moved doggedly forward like an automaton.

At last he stood on the crest of the ridge. Below him was a small basin, and at the far side of the basin was a cabin. Light was streaming out of a window which was facing him.

The corporal looked down at the cabin feeling neither elation nor satisfaction. He was far past any form of sensation. He merely nodded his head in a dull, tired way. He had known he should find a camp, and there it was.

He tottered forward again and began the descent down to the basin. But he found it infinitely more difficult to go down-hill than up. Constantly his knees threatened to buckle under him, and he had to grab at branches and brush with his one sound hand to steady himself. His right shoulder and arm were throbbing with pain, and his head felt like splitting. At times spasms of dizziness attacked him, and he had to hang on to friendly branches till his head cleared.

At last he gained the floor of the basin, and he started across guided by the glare from the lighted window in the shack. But now his force was nearly spent. He reeled forward swaying from side to side, almost bent double, and more frequently it became necessary for him to hang on to some tree or branch for support.

At last he splashed through a shallow stream and began to climb up the slope to the small plateau on which the cabin was situated.

Only about a hundred feet separated him from his goal when he stumbled over a rock and fell forward on his knees. He barely saved himself from sprawling headlong by thrusting his left arm against the ground. A burning, torturing spasm of pain shot through his damaged shoulder, and for a moment he was on the point of fainting. He felt unutter-

ably weary and spent, and he had an almost irresistible urge to let himself drop to the ground and rest.

But a persistent voice kept whispering to him that he must not give in now. And little by little his mind cleared.

He tried to struggle to his feet, but found the effort quite beyond him. As soon as he tried to raise his body sparkling lights shot through his aching head and set it spinning and reeling.

For a few moments he crouched there panting, fighting back the giddiness his effort had brought on. He realized it would be impossible for him to regain his feet, so he slowly and laboriously began to crawl towards the cabin on his knees and his left arm.

Inch by inch he dragged himself towards his goal. Each move was torturing agony. His breath came in hissing, laboured gasps, and sweat streamed down his face and mingled with the rain which was still streaming down over him from the black, drifting clouds overhead.

He began to doubt that he had enough strength left to get up to the cabin, which was now tantalizingly close. He thought of shouting; but some instinct warned him that he would hardly be able to force out a call which would penetrate the walls and closed door of the cabin above the sound of the wind, which was still growling and snarling through the tree-tops. It would only mean a waste of breath, and he sorely needed what little he had left. So he struggled on, though each yard seemed like an endless stretch.

At last, almost with his last spasm of strength, he managed to drag himself to the entrance to the cabin. But here a new problem faced him. He could not raise his body so that he could get his arm free to knock on the closed door.

For a moment his dazed, dull brains grappled with this problem, then he pushed himself painfully forward and

butted his aching head against the door, though the pain which shot through it almost made everything go black.

He heard hurried footsteps inside, the door was flung open, and Roy Bancroft stood in the open doorway.

For a few seconds Roy could only stare in incredulous, stupefied amazement at the man who crouched there in the ruddy glare from the lighted lantern in the shack. A pair of unnaturally big, burning eyes looked up at him from a white, haggard face, streaming with rain and sweat, intermingled with blood which oozed from rips and scratches in the skin. The man was bare-headed, and his hair was plastered to his head with moisture. He was kneeling there with one hand supporting the body, while the other hand was tucked into the opening of his tunic.

It was only when Roy became aware of the tattered scarlet tunic with the two gold chevrons on its right sleeve that recognition came to him.

"Corporal Williams!" he gasped, hardly able to believe his eyes. "What the . . . How the . . ." His voice trailed off. He saw the corporal's lips move, and he bent down close to catch the words.

"Roy . . . you must flee . . . the . . . country . . . at . . . once," came in a slow, almost inaudible whisper. "We . . . found . . . your . . . tobacco-pouch . . . by . . . Ware's body. They . . . know . . . you . . . did . . . it. Leave . . . before . . . they . . . crowd . . . in on . . . you. You . . ."

Here the corporal broke off and fell face forward in a dead faint.

CHAPTER XI

CORPORAL WILLIAMS AND ROY BANCROFT

WHEN Corporal Williams again opened his eyes it was broad daylight. He felt weak and shaky, and his mind felt dazed and blank. He lay wondering where he was and how he had got there.

He realized he was lying flat on his back on a low spruce-bunk with blankets drawn over him. He gazed curiously about him.

He was inside a log-cabin. The sun was streaming into the room through four small cracked panes of glass in a window on one of the walls. The rest of the panes, he noticed, were missing, and the gaps had recently been covered over with boards.

The furniture was very scanty. A rickety old home-made table, two ditto stools, and in one corner near the door was a rusty old cooking-stove, in which a merry fire was crackling.

Just across the room was another spruce-bed, on top of which was spread a blanket. A gunny-sack had evidently served the sleeper, whoever he was, as pillow.

The log walls were bare except for a small mirror, and an assortment of traps and clothing which hung on nails. Amongst the clothing he noticed his own tunic and breeches, and he discovered with some concern that they were both badly in need of repairs. Especially so the tunic, which showed big rents and gashes.

For a while he lay quite still while these details sank in. Then he stirred, and immediately a stinging pain shot through his right shoulder. And he also noticed that his right arm felt numb and funny. He couldn't move it. It felt as if something was holding it tightly pressed to his body.

He lifted a corner of the blankets to investigate, and discovered to his surprise that his right elbow was tightly strapped to his side, while the under arm lay across his body resting in a sling. Puzzled, he put his left arm up to his shoulder, and found that a piece of board was resting on it, being held in position by bandages.

For some moments he lay wondering, trying to catch an elusive memory which shimmered before his dulled mind. Then with a rush memory returned to him. He remembered his search for Roy Bancroft, and the storm which had swept over him in the woods. He also remembered that something heavy had fallen on him, and knocked him down. But from that point on his recollection of events was hazy and vague.

He seemed to remember having gone towards a cabin, the lighted window of which had gleamed in the dark night. And he also dimly remembered that he had seen Roy Bancroft stand outlined in the light which streamed through the open doorway of a shack, and that he had delivered the warning to Roy which he had travelled so far to convey.

But then, where was he now? reflected the corporal. Roy would certainly have fled as soon as he got the warning. But some person was here looking after him. His bandaged arm and shoulder, and the fire crackling in the stove were ample proof of that. But who could it be?

He gave it up. His brain felt tired, and would not function properly. It seemed so hard to try to figure out things. He would have to wait and see what happened.

Presently he heard the light footfalls of moccasined feet

approaching the entrance. A few moments later the door opened and Roy Bancroft entered the room, carrying a pail of water in his hand.

The corporal could only stare at him in speechless amaze.

Roy cast a glance over to the bunk, and when he saw the occupant's eyes gazing at him, a broad grin broke out on his face.

"Well, well," he remarked cheerfully. "So you've decided to come back to life at last. Gosh, you certainly have got some tough constitution, I'll tell the world. I thought you were a goner for sure. You've lain there almost like a corpse since you crawled into my camp four days ago, with a broken shoulder, a hell of a dose of fever, and looking like a dying ghost."

At Roy's words the corporal snapped back into full consciousness. He started up in bed, but the effort proved too much for him. He fell back with a groan, his head spinning dizzily.

"Four days," he repeated weakly. "Four days gone and you're still here. Why didn't you clear out at once like I told you?"

"Why should I?" asked Roy curiously. He placed the pail of water near the stove, pulled one of the stools over to the corporal's bunk, and sat down. "Besides," he continued, "who should have looked after you if I had pulled out?"

"No need to bother about me," answered the corporal. "You should have gone at once."

"But why?" insisted Roy.

"Didn't you get my warning?" asked Williams, looking significantly at Roy.

"Well, the night you blew in here you mumbled something about Ware and a tobacco-pouch, and that I must clear out at once. But I couldn't make head or tail of it all. And, besides, you passed out before you were

all through, and haven't been open for conversation from then till just now. To tell the truth, I thought you were out of your head and were gibbering nonsense."

"But don't you understand, Roy!" exclaimed the corporal excitedly. "We found your tobacco-pouch beside the body of Sergeant Ware. He was found murdered in the woods near your house."

For a moment Roy stared at the corporal in open-mouthed amazement.

"Say, what's that?" he asked sharply. "Sergeant Ware is murdered, you say?"

Williams nodded his head, dully wondering why Roy pretended ignorance.

"Yes. He was murdered the night you were supposed to have left Portage Bend, and when we found his body your tobacco-pouch was lying beside it," explained the corporal in a tired voice.

While the corporal spoke Roy's jaws had closed with a snap, and his eyebrows came together in a heavy frown. He gazed steadily down at the corporal.

"I begin to get the drift of all this," he said in a hard tone of voice. "You think I killed him."

"What else could we think?" asked the corporal deprecatingly.

"Before I make up my mind about that, I have to hear all about this business," answered Roy evenly. "So tell me all about it."

"Is that necessary?" asked the corporal.

For a moment Roy's face darkened, and he looked as if he were going to give some angry answer. But he controlled himself with an effort.

"I wouldn't have asked you if I hadn't considered it necessary," he said quietly. "Now tell me how and where you found the sergeant's body, my tobacco-pouch, and all the rest of it."

The corporal told him as briefly as possible. How he

hated the whole wretched, sordid business! How he wished Roy had taken his warning and cleared out! If he had, the whole hideous affair would have been settled by now. At least, as far as he himself was concerned. But now four precious days had gone to waste, and it was impossible to say what would happen. It might be too late for Roy to make his escape now, and he would have had all his hardships and tribulations for nothing.

When the corporal had finished his explanation, Roy sat looking down at him, a puzzled, perplexed expression on his face.

"Listen," he said after a while. "If I got you right you are firmly convinced that I killed Sergeant Ware. And in spite of that you come all the way up here to warn me, so that I can have a chance to escape. That right?"

The corporal's head on the pillow moved in a faint nod.

"Rather unusual for the police to go ahead and warn their suspects, isn't it?" continued Roy with a faint smile. "I thought your duty was to arrest them."

The corporal winced, and a faint touch of colour crept into his wan cheeks.

"Never mind about our duty," he said shortly. "Now you know how things stand, and you'd better clear out as quickly as you can. If you use your head you may still be able to get through and across the Line into the States. Once down there all you've got to do is to drop your identity and exercise reasonable care, and it will be almost impossible to trace you. And the sooner you get started the better."

"Plenty of time," observed Roy quietly, still smiling. "There are a few more things I have to find out first. Now, why did you do this for me?"

"That's my business," answered Williams.

"Not quite. Remember I'm in this, right up to my neck. And naturally I want to know all there is to know about it. And one of the first things I want to find out is

why you turned"—Roy was going to say "traitor to your own crowd," but he caught himself before the ugly term had escaped his lips—"I mean, why you turned against your duty to give me a chance to escape. I won't stir an inch before you explain that to me."

"Well, if you must know, I was going to spare your sister the ordeal of seeing her only brother being hauled before the court as a murderer, and—and the unavoidable consequences," growled the corporal, looking up at Roy with grim defiance.

Roy nodded his head.

"I suspected that was the reason," he muttered. "But here is another thing I should like to know: what's going to happen to you if I clear out?"

"Oh, I shall be all right."

"Yes, you will, I don't think," remarked Roy dryly. "With a broken shoulder and as weak as you are, you'd be about as capable to look after yourself as a new-born baby."

"Don't you bother about me," answered the corporal with calm determination. "I shall be able to manage."

"Now don't talk like a dam'd fool!" snapped Roy, scowling severely down on the corporal. "You know darn well you're far too helpless to look after yourself. I may be a murderer and all the rest of it; but, dam' it, man! I'm not quite such a low skunk that I sneak off and leave a crippled, helpless man alone out here in the woods to shift for himself! So I'm going to stay!"

The corporal's face worked with distress and excitement. He made an effort to sit up, but dropped back with a smothered groan.

"For God's sake listen to reason, Roy!" he pleaded feverishly. "Do as I say! Be sensible and clear out while there is still a chance to get away safely. Please, Roy. Hurry and leave at once!"

Again Roy smiled.

"Perhaps you can also tell me how I'm going to go?" he asked dryly. "Fly like a bird through the air or something?"

"What do you mean?" asked the corporal, looking blankly up at him. "You've got a canoe, haven't you?"

"I sure have," grinned Roy. "But canoeing is over for this season as it happens. It has been freezing hard and steady since that storm, and the rivers and lakes are already covered with ice. So I haven't got much chance even if I wanted to clear out."

When Roy had finished speaking an expression of despair shot into the corporal's face. He closed his eyes as if in pain, while the pallid haggardness of his features seemed to grow more pronounced.

"All in vain," he muttered in a low, weak voice. "Now she'll think . . ." His voice trailed away into an incoherent mumble.

Roy watched him, his eyes softening.

"Listen, Corporal," he said. "I haven't finished my say yet. Listen closely and make sure you get this. You've been jumping to conclusions too fast. I never killed Ware. I was miles up the river when the murder took place. The first I heard about it was when you told me a few minutes ago."

The corporal opened his eyes and stared at Roy, a mingled expression of hope and incredulity in his gaze.

"You—you didn't kill him?" he stuttered.

"I certainly did not!" declared Roy emphatically.

"But—but your tobacco-pouch found by the body?" stammered Williams, a little bewildered.

"Well, I don't know how that got there at all. I missed it the first day out, and thought I'd left it at home. But how it got to be where it was found is more than I can tell. Except somebody got hold of it and planted it there to throw the blame on me," he ended with a thoughtful frown on his face.

"But why did you leave town so secretly that day, Roy?" asked the corporal. "Nobody seemed to know you had gone, nor where you had gone to. You seemed just to have faded away, so you can't blame us for becoming suspicious. I couldn't even find out that you'd bought an outfit, though I inquired at the stores."

"I bought my supplies from Angus McKenzie," grinned Roy. "And I certainly sneaked quietly out of town. I had my reasons for fading smoothly out of the picture, though it had nothing to do with the killing of Sergeant Ware."

"What were the reasons?" asked the corporal, looking searchingly at Roy.

Roy reflected for a few moments. Finally he nodded his head as if he had come to a decision.

"I'd better make a clean breast of everything," he said. "I seem to have got myself into such a helluva mess anyhow, so I might as well tell you the rest. I was a member of that gang which has been running booze into town lately. In fact, I was the leader of the bunch which brought the booze up from down river. And I was running things the night you and Wrenn got tied up by our cache," confessed Roy, looking apologetically at the corporal.

"I suspected as much," commented the latter with a faint smile. "I thought I recognized your voice among the men."

"You did?" asked Roy, surprised. "Why the dickens didn't you arrest me then?"

"My suspicions were too vague for that," answered Williams. "And besides, it was not till quite some time later that it dawned on me that it was your voice I'd heard. But get on with your story."

"Well, after that mix-up with you out at our cache, I felt it was decidedly time to quit. I said as much to Tyson. . . ."

"Oh, I say! Was Tyson in that?" interrupted Williams quickly.

"He sure was. He was the directing genius, so to speak. And also the financial backer."

"I might have known it," murmured the corporal. "That nasty little bounder would naturally be mixed up in a thing like that."

"Well, as I was going to say," continued Roy. "Tyson didn't at all see things my way. Called me a quitter and other sweet little things like that. But I didn't mind about that. I had already made up my mind to sneak quietly up here. I knew about this camp and knew the cabin could be made quite comfortable with a little fixing. Sis had also been after me to go out trapping for a season. She thought I was hitting it up a bit too much down in town, and I guess she was right. But then things got rather mixed between Tyson and me. He wanted me to do a certain thing for him, and when I flatly refused he howled blue murder, and threatened to give me away to the police. Well, one word led to another, and we were both of us steaming rather hotly for a while. But I soon simmered down and grew canny. I knew that if Tyson carried out his threat I should be stopped from going, and besides, I would be in one hell of a mess. So I pretended to make up to him, while I secretly prepared to skip out. I had Joan take my canoe across the river to Angus's place, and he supplied my whole outfit. Then in the afternoon I sneaked across and streaked up the river. That was around five on the day Sergeant Ware was killed. So you see, I was miles up the river when the murder came off."

"What was the big row about you had with Tyson?" asked Williams.

Roy scowled darkly as his memory flashed back to Tyson's unsavoury suggestion that day in the latter's office.

"Might as well tell you," he growled. "That mangy hound had the brazen gall to propose to Joan, and when

she didn't see things his way, he slipped across some cave-man stuff, and had the nerve to kiss her against her will."

The corporal ripped out a curse, and the scowl on his face surpassed Roy's.

"He—he did that?" he asked, almost choking with fury.

Roy nodded his head darkly.

"He sure did. He told me so himself. Said he had lost his head, and bunkum like that. Well, Joan handed him the frozen mitt, good and proper; forbade him even to speak to her. Then that skunk had the nerve to suggest to me that I should put in a good word for him with Joan! What do you think of that for gall? Of course I refused flatly, and with trimmings. Well, then it was that the fireworks started, and started proper."

"Some day I'm going to wring that bounder's neck for him!" threatened the corporal viciously. "A beastly mess like him daring to propose to a girl like your sister! And then—kissing her against her will!" The last words came as an explosion of wrath.

"He sure has gall," agreed Roy. "Well, anyhow, after that I was more determined than ever to clear out and break with that fellow for good."

"And quite right too," approved Williams warmly.

Roy got up from his stool and walked across the room to throw a few sticks into the stove.

"Say, Corporal," he said as he reseated himself. "There's one thing which has puzzled me considerably. How did you find me up here? Who told you where I'd gone?"

"Nobody," answered the corporal with a faint smile. "I had a hunch." And he told Roy how he had arrived at his suspicion with regard to the latter's destination.

"And your hunch was right," grinned Roy. "For a moment I was afraid Joan had told you. She was the only one who knew, you see. But she promised not to

tell a soul, and it would have hurt a bit if I had found out that she had broken her promise."

"No, she didn't. I asked her where you were, and she was close as an oyster."

"Good old Sis! I knew I could trust her," chuckled Roy, pride in his voice. But suddenly his face tightened, and he frowned with grave suspicion down at the corporal. "I hope you didn't tell her why you were interested in finding me?" he asked.

A dull flush of embarrassment broke out on the corporal's face.

"I'm afraid I did, Roy," he confessed in a low voice, looking uneasily up at his companion.

With an oath Roy sprang to his feet, his face dark with anger.

"Dam' you!" he cried passionately. "I thought you had more heart and sense than to run to a girl with a story like that! I'm half sorry now I didn't leave you to die the night you came crawling into my camp!"

"But listen, Roy," pleaded the distressed corporal. "I couldn't help myself. This is what happened." And he told Roy about his interview with Joan, and all that had transpired.

Roy's face gradually cleared while he listened to Williams's explanation, and when the latter had finished he smiled a little.

"Oh, well. I see I can't blame you much," he commented. "I know Sis has a way with her to get at the truth when her mind is set on it. I've had a few experiences myself. Though through years of practice I've learnt to side-track her to some extent when I found it inconvenient to tell her the whole truth and nothing but the truth. Though, I'll confess, it often comes hard!"

But gradually his smile died, and his face grew grave again.

"Dash it all!" he exclaimed, beginning to stride frown-

ingly back and forth on the floor. "This sure makes things dam' awkward. I wish to God this hadn't happened. I seem to have got myself into an even worse mix-up than I realized. I've even dragged poor Joan into this ugly mess!"

"But she doesn't believe you're guilty," broke in Williams eagerly. "She was quite emphatic about that. So perhaps she won't be worrying much."

"Of course she'll be worrying!" snorted Roy from the floor. "She'll be worrying her soul out wondering what's going to happen. She'll know you've started out on my trail. Oh, gosh! What a mess! If I could only get in touch with her and explain things. . . . But what's the use? We'll probably have to stay cooped up here till the spring. Poor Sis," he ended with a sigh.

"Listen, Roy. We'll soon have a snowfall, and as soon as the snow is on the ground you could probably get in on snow-shoes," suggested Williams.

"I suppose I could. But you couldn't. It'll be months before you can carry a pack with that smashed shoulder of yours," retorted Roy.

"But I told you not to bother about me," protested Williams. "You just go ahead. I shall be able to manage."

"So you told me before," answered Roy shortly. "But that's all off. I've made up my mind to deliver you safely in Portage Bend, so don't harp on that string!"

"But . . ." ventured the corporal.

"No buts about it. I'm set on staying here, and when I say I'm set, I mean it! Only I wish . . . Oh, hell! What's the use of wishing?" he added, shrugging his shoulders. "Sis will have to bear it till we manage to get down. Luckily she's got a strong mind of her own, so she'll be able to stand the strain without going to pieces. But it sure is some mess!" And he resumed his perambulations, a frown of distress on his face.

The corporal followed his moving form for a few minutes with eyes which were gradually becoming more and more troubled and uneasy.

"Listen, Roy," he said presently, grave concern in his voice. "I don't want to be any calamity-howler or that sort of thing, but are you quite sure you shall be able to clear yourself?"

Roy stopped short, and stared darkly down at the corporal.

"What are you driving at now?" he asked.

"Now remember, I'm looking at the whole business now as the judge and jury would look at it," said Williams in an apologetic tone of voice. "And here is a very important point. You say you lost your tobacco-pouch somewhere, and can't explain how it came to be found near Ware's body. But can you prove you lost it before the murder took place?" He looked anxiously up at Roy.

For a while Roy stood still, his brow puckered in deep thought. Gradually his face darkened.

"No, I can't prove it," he growled at last. "Of course I can't. Seeing I don't know when I lost it nor where. But, anyhow, I was way up the river when the murder took place."

"Can you prove you were?"

Roy walked over to the stool beside the corporal's bunk and sat heavily down. For a while he sat there thinking deeply.

"The way you put it, it certainly looks as if I'm deeper in the soup than I thought," he said slowly. "I don't know just that I can prove I was up the river around the time the sergeant was killed. Of course, I met a few people pretty far up the river the next day; but I guess that wouldn't carry much weight. Your people would probably say I'd been paddling the whole night through to make up for lost time. Wait a minute, though," he continued quickly, his face brightening. "I just remem-

bered something. I camped about fifteen miles above town that night. And while I was sitting by my camp-fire after supper a canoe going down-stream passed out on the river, close to my camp. And the fellows in the canoe must have seen who it was, seeing the light of the fire fell right on my face, and I was facing the river."

"And about what time was that?" asked Williams eagerly.

"Must have been well after nine, nearer ten, I should say. You see, I pitched camp late that night, as I wanted to get as far away from town as possible."

"Good. That about proves conclusively that you could not have been in town when the murder took place," declared Williams with satisfaction. "Who were the people in the canoe?"

The brightness died out of Roy's face, and he shook his head slowly and despondently.

"I don't know," he confessed. "It was a dark night, and I couldn't see who was in that canoe. I only saw it pass more or less as a shadow. But I think there were two persons in it. But I can find them," he continued eagerly. "Somebody is sure to know who came in late that night, and I'm going to find out who they were even if I have to take the whole town apart!"

"But suppose you don't find them?" suggested Williams gently. "What then? You know, the people in that canoe may have been a party of prospectors who were only passing through town. You remember there was a train out the following day, and they may have gone out on that."

"I don't think so," answered Roy thoughtfully. "Fellows travelling on the river on a night as dark as that must have been pretty well familiar with it. So I don't think they could have been roaming prospectors. But, of course, there is a chance that you may be right. But even so, those fellows must have stayed at one of the

hotels overnight, so it should be easy to get a line on them."

The corporal slowly shook his head on the pillow.

"You forget one thing," he said gravely. "Prospectors and chaps like that who just pass through town very seldom leave any forwarding address. So even if you found that your men had put up at one of the hotels, how are you going to find them if they have left no address? Their names may be quite ordinary, which probably won't indicate anything."

Roy's face fell while he listened to the corporal.

"Dam' my soul!" he exclaimed moodily. "I never thought of that. I certainly seem to be badly tangled up. That is, if you are right."

"Yes, you are tangled up—badly," agreed the corporal gravely. "And the more I think the matter over, the more convinced I am that the best course for you would be to clear out."

"Now, I've told you . . ." broke in Roy hotly; but the corporal silenced him by a wave of his sound hand.

"Don't interrupt before you've heard what I was going to say," he begged. "Here's my suggestion. You clear out as soon as you can and try to slip across the Line into the States, as I suggested before. As soon as you have found a safe hiding-place down there, send me your address. I shall in the meantime try to trace those men who passed your camp on the river that night. If I find them, and they can testify that they saw you in your camp, everything will be all right, and I shall drop you a line to come back at once. But if not . . ."

"Here! Hold on a minute!" protested Roy. "How will you ever get a chance to trace those fellows? You forget that if I leave you you won't be able to look after yourself."

"But I will by the time you leave. You have to make your dash on snow-shoes after the first snowfall, and by

that time I shall be able to move around. And if you cut a good supply of firewood, I shall be able to get along fine. Of course, you'll also have to fetch up my supplies. I cached them by a creek some ten or twelve miles south of here. You can easily find my trail, as I had to do a lot of chopping to get through the brush. And as soon as the winter-trails are open, they'll be sure to send out a patrol to look for me. They know where I was going. And before you clear out you can leave signs down by the lake, so they can find me without wasting too much time trying to locate me. Pretty sound plan, don't you think? "

Roy shook his head stubbornly.

"It's no good, Corporal," he said quietly. "I'm going to stay right here and take the consequences."

"But listen, Roy," pleaded Williams earnestly. "I don't think you quite realize the seriousness of your position. If you are brought to trial the way things stand, I'm afraid you'll be worse than up against it. You won't be able to disprove any of the evidence against you. All you can bring against it are denials, with nothing to back them up. That is, if we can't find those fellows who passed your camp. And I warned you, that might prove impossible. So, you see, the evidence against you would be damning. Especially in the hands of a clever prosecutor. You don't know those fellows as I know them. They'll turn and twist the smallest bit of evidence against the accused so cleverly, that by the time they're through the accused himself will begin to wonder whether he isn't guilty after all, even if he is innocent as a new-born babe. Take it from me. I know. No, Roy. The best thing for you would be to take my advice and clear out, while I tackle the job of clearing you."

"No, I'm hanged if I clear out!" growled Roy shortly. "I'm through with running away. I ran away once to dodge trouble, and see where that has landed me! Besides, you're forgetting one important thing. If I run away,

Joan will think me guilty. But if I return with you, and face the music, she'll know I'm innocent when I tell her, whatever happens."

"Don't worry about your sister," said the corporal quickly. "I'll explain the whole situation to her."

"Even if you do, she would probably think it was a story we had made up between us to keep her from worrying. And at any rate, she'd consider me a blasted coward for running away and let you fight my battles for me. And what about yourself? You'd get into hot water if I clear out. How were you going to explain that I escaped?"

"Oh, that'll be easy. My crippled arm will explain why I couldn't hold you," replied the corporal with a grin.

"Yes, I know!" snapped Roy. "It would mean lying and fibbing till you'd feel like kicking yourself. No, sir. I'm going to face this thing, and dam' the consequences! I'm going to stay right here till we can get out, and then I'm going back to Portage Bend with you. That's flat and final! So it would only be waste of breath to try and persuade me to do anything else!" he ended with set determination.

For a moment the corporal looked at Roy, a mixed expression of disappointment and distress on his face. But presently he smiled, and held out his left hand to Roy.

"Here, shake, Roy," he cried impulsively. "I don't know who killed Ware, but I'm dam'd sure you didn't!"

Roy took the proffered hand with an embarrassed grin.

"Thank you," he said. "I'm glad to hear that somebody believes in me. If I can clear myself, I'm certainly going on the warpath and try to find the skunk who put up this job on me."

"And I'll do all I can to help you," promised the corporal warmly. "Have you any suspicions as to who could have done it? What about Tyson? You had that

row with him, remember, so he might have done it to get even."

But Roy shook his head doubtfully.

"I thought of Tyson myself," he admitted. "But somehow I can't quite see Tyson committing murder. Not because I don't think him capable of it, but simply because I don't think he's got enough guts. Though one never knows," he continued reflectively. "He's pretty deep. So he may have more guts concealed in his worthless carcass than he lets the world see."

"Anyone else you can think of?"

Roy slowly shook his head. For a few moments he sat buried in thought, while the corporal watched him in silence.

Suddenly the former lifted his head quickly. A sudden thought had struck him.

"Say, I just thought of something," he said, turning eager eyes to the corporal. "It seems to me that your prosecutor won't have much of a case against me after all, in spite of that tobacco-pouch. He has to prove that there was reasonable cause why I should murder Sergeant Ware. And there's absolutely none, as far as I can see. I hardly knew the sergeant by sight, and I never spoke to him in my life. So why should I have killed him? Seems to me that his proofs would be too weak to convince any jury that I did it. I suppose I don't exactly look like a fellow who would go around and murder people just for the fun of it. At least I hope not. Or have you perhaps discovered some motive along with your other discoveries?" he asked suspiciously as the corporal maintained an uneasy, troubled silence.

For a moment the corporal reflected. Realizing, as he did now, that Roy was innocent of Sergeant Ware's murder, he hated to confess to the further ugly suspicions they had harboured against him. But at last he decided that it would be best to tell Roy the whole truth. So,

half apologetically, he explained to Roy how they had come to consider the second crime a logical consequence of the first.

Roy listened to him in silence, his face darkening. When the corporal had finished he glared angrily down at him for a few moments, then suddenly he threw back his head and laughed.

"Well, I must say you fellows have a fine, flattering opinion of me," he exclaimed, a trace of bitterness in his voice. "You must think me one helluva fine fellow, to suspect me of one bank robbery and two murders!"

"Be reasonable, Roy," begged the corporal. "I explained to you how the only clue we've found so far was pointing straight to you, so I can't see how you can blame us. In fact, both the inspector and I found it hard to link you up with any of the crimes. The inspector actually told me he couldn't believe you'd done it."

"Well, that is something to be grateful for," grinned Roy, mollified. "It helps me to regain some of my self-respect, which I was beginning to lose fast and furiously. But now I'm going to tell you something which will raise hell with your precious clues. I can *prove* I'd no hand in that affair at the bank!"

An eager light shot into Williams's eyes.

"You can?" he cried. "Positively?"

"I sure can. Absolutely positively, as you say. So positively that even your persuasive prosecutor can't shake it an inch. That night I was playing poker with four of my friends in town. We started playing around nine, and the party didn't break up till after one. I went straight home from there. Joan was awake when I got in. She spoke to me from her room. So my friends and Joan between them can prove that I couldn't have been near the bank around the time the robbery took place."

"Splendid, Roy!" exclaimed Williams enthusiastically, his face beaming with pleasure. "That certainly knocks

the bottom out of our case against you, good and proper! This decidedly lets you out, and we can concentrate on that one thing: to find out who actually did do it and then tried to throw the blame on you."

"Now you're shouting! And I hope we find that dirty, sneaking skunk right soon," growled Roy fervently. "And when we find him, I hope he gets all that's coming to him, and then some! The filthy, mangy cur! Dam' it, I should like to . . ."

He broke off, jumped up from his stool with an exclamation, and hurried over to the stove.

"Knew it!" he announced in a disgusted, aggrieved voice after one look at the fire. "Nearly out. That comes of sitting gassing like two old women. I thought the shack was getting chilly. And I'm one helluva host, I am," he moaned as he crammed wood into the stove. "While I ought to have made some grub for you, I've been situng chewing the rag. Gosh, you must be about starved. You've had nothing but water since you blew in here. Guess you feel like some nourishment?"

"I certainly do," grinned Williams. "My stomach is actually groaning with intent and purpose."

"Well, don't you go ahead and build up any false hopes," warned Roy. "You won't get much. Only some soup and a little bannock and butter. Won't do to give you anything more solid to start with or you'll be sick."

"All right. You're the doctor," sighed Williams resignedly. He had secretly hoped for a more substantial bill of fare, but he suspected Roy was right.

For a while there was silence in the room while Roy busied himself with pots and pans over by the stove. Presently he turned around and faced the corporal.

"Listen," he said a little awkwardly. "I guess you must think I'm an ungrateful cuss. It just occurred to me that I never gave you a word of thanks for what you intended doing for me. But, somehow, I was too busy

thinking of other things to remember. I know what it must have cost you to decide the way you did," he continued gravely, "and believe me, I appreciate it more than I can say. And you've piled up a debt against me which I can never hope to repay."

"Oh, forget it, Roy," muttered the embarrassed corporal, wriggling uneasily.

"No, that's one thing I'm never going to forget. And I guess Joan will be as grateful as me when she hears all about it."

The corporal at once became agitated.

"Listen!" he cried in alarm. "That's one thing you must never tell a soul! And least of all your sister!"

"But why not?" asked Roy, surprised. "I know it's not a thing to shout from the house-tops, everything considered; but Joan certainly ought to know about it, seeing it was for her sake you decided to do what you intended doing."

"No, Roy, this is a matter which must remain strictly between the two of us. Not a single soul must hear about it. You must promise me that you'll keep it strictly to yourself!" The corporal's voice was firm and peremptory.

For a few moments Roy stared silently and reflectively at the corporal. At last he nodded his head.

"All right. I get you," he said briefly.

Then he turned back to the stove. But as soon as he had his back once more turned on his guest, a mischievous grin broke out on his face, which persisted as he bent his attention to his interrupted culinary efforts.

CHAPTER XII

CAPTIVITY IN THE FROZEN NORTH, AND RELEASE

THE following days passed quietly in the camp. The corporal's sound constitution asserted itself, and he improved quickly. Soon he was able to move around in the shack.

The weather kept clear and calm, but the temperature dropped steadily.

One day Roy started out to fetch in the corporal's outfit. He started early in the morning, and returned towards dark, tired and sweating profusely.

"Gosh, that's the worst spell of packing I've ever had in my life!" he observed wearily, after he had dropped the heavy load on the floor of the shack with a sigh of relief and thankfulness. He stretched himself stiffly, and continued: "My back feels broken, and I'm afraid I shall never be the same man I used to be. I had no trouble picking up your trail. You sure had done a lot of chopping through all that tangled brush. And your cache was O.K. Nothing had been disturbed. I covered up your canoe with brush and put a few rocks on top, so it will be there when somebody cares to recover it.

"By the way, I found your hat and axe. They're in the pack. I found them at the place where you were knocked out. Can't understand how it was you weren't knocked out for good and always. A big, hefty spruce had been split from top to root by lightning, and heavy

bits of timber had been thrown in all directions. Close by your hat lay a thick, heavy limb. I guess that was the fellow that broke your shoulder. You were lucky, though. If that bit of timber had hit your head, you'd have been past repair. But what beats me is how you managed to crawl in here that night in the state you were in. Must have been plain hell. You must be as tough as hickory after all."

"I guess I am," grinned Williams. "Though I can't say I remember much about that trip. It all appears to me only as a vague, unpleasant nightmare. But I'm glad I've got my own blankets at last. I've felt rather guilty robbing you of half of yours now the nights are getting cold."

"Oh, it hasn't been too bad," answered Roy. "Of course it would have been better if we could have doubled up in one bunk, but that wouldn't do with your sore shoulder. But I won't deny that we shall both be a lot more comfortable now we've got plenty of blankets."

Following Roy's trip four more days passed uneventfully. But on the fifth day clouds began to roll up from the horizon, and gusts of wind began to sweep through the forest with hollow groans, the vanguards of a brewing storm.

Before night a stinging, blinding blizzard was raging outside. The wind shrieked through the tall timber. Occasionally gusts of wind were thrown into the basin from the surrounding hills, and they shook the cabin, while hard grains of snow rubbed and grated against the outside walls.

For three days the blizzard raged with unabated fury, then the wind gradually died down and the snow stopped falling. And on the fourth day the sun shone down on a new, white world, and set it aglitter.

As soon as the blizzard was over Roy took an old ragged red blanket, left behind by some former occupant of the shack, donned his snow-shoes, and started out for the lake.

He was back in a few hours, and reported that he had

fastened the blanket to the top of a high spruce, which stood on a promontory jutting into the lake. The blanket could be seen far out on the lake, he assured the corporal, as the red colour would show up plainly against the snow and the dark green spruce forest. On the trunk of the tree, about four feet above the ground, he had cut a big blaze, and on it he had written directions where the corporal could be found. So as soon as the relief expedition came along, they would have no difficulties in finding their way up to the camp.

After that they had nothing much to do except wait. But it was hard to wait with patience. As Roy summed up the situation :

"Dam' it all! It's one hell of a note being cooped up here, not being able to do a thing about that business down in the Bend. We've discussed the whole affair backwards and forwards between us, and we've got nowhere. If we were down there we could nose around and try to find out things. And then we would have had Inspector Weston to give us a hand. I'm quite sure he would be able to get a line on things after he'd heard what I've got to say."

"Yes, it should clear up the fog a little," agreed the corporal. "But as you say, before we get down, there's not one thing we can do."

The two young men were fast getting genuinely attached to each other. Down in Portage Bend Williams had found Roy surly and sullen, but up here he was a different person altogether. He was always cheerful and friendly, and seemed to be in constant good humour. So Williams decided that it was Roy's somewhat unwholesome mode of living, and his connection with the smugglers, which had set his temper on edge down in town. The real Roy, he decided, was his present cheery, breezy companion.

On the other hand, Roy had always had a certain liking for the corporal. He had found him fair, square, and decent. But in view of the line of business Roy was pursu-

ing, he naturally considered every man connected with the police a natural enemy, and consequently he became wary and reserved when in his company. But now, after he knew what the corporal had intended to do for him, his feelings for the latter amounted almost to hero-worship.

But there were times when the corporal felt despondent and depressed, though he endeavoured to hide the fact from Roy as best he could. He felt that Fate had cheated him. Now he would be bringing in Roy after all, and Joan would naturally take that as proof of the truth of the unkind accusations she had hurled at him on that eventful morning down in Portage Bend. She would be firmly convinced in her belief that he was only a ruthless, unfeeling tracker of men. And the realization hurt. He had never had much hope of winning her love, but at least he had hoped she might learn to think of him with friendly feelings. But that would be out of the question now.

There were times when Williams felt sorely tempted to revoke his dictum to Roy about keeping his thwarted intentions a dead secret as far as Joan was concerned. But he crushed the temptation. He felt that would be a sneaky, mean way of gaining favours, totally unworthy of any man.

And there were other reflections which tended to add to the corporal's depression. There was one thing he had to do when he returned to Portage Bend, and his heart quailed within him at the mere thought of what he was in honour bound to do, and the certain consequences.

Roy had given up all thought of trapping. When the corporal tackled him about it, he answered cheerfully:

"What's the use? I will only have to break off just when I've got properly started. In three or four more weeks or so your fellows will be here to take us out."

"Yes. But I don't think there's any reason why you should go out with us now," protested the corporal. "As things stand, it's proved beyond any doubt that you are not concerned in any way with the crimes which have taken

place down in Portage Bend. At least, it will be proved as soon as we have collected the evidence from those fellows you were playing poker with on the night that affair took place at the bank. I'll take down your story in writing, have you sign it, and I feel certain that's all that's wanted. No need for you to give up your trapping."

"I'm going in with you, all right," answered Roy firmly. "I simply ache with the desire to trace that fellow who tried to spring this dirty trick on me. And I want to be right on the spot, so I can talk things over with the inspector. There may be several things he'd like to know that we haven't thought of."

"Yes, I think you are right. Perhaps it's just as well if you toddle along with us," agreed the corporal.

Roy used to take trips out every day to look for moose-tracks, but he had no success. He dare not move too far away from camp while the corporal was still in his badly crippled condition.

Then on the forenoon of the fifth day after the blizzard, when Roy had gone out for another try, the corporal heard three shots being fired in rapid succession down somewhere near the lake.

"Roy has found a moose at last," he observed to himself with a grin. "Well, it'll be a god-send to get some fresh meat again. The canned stuff is beginning to pall on the old palate."

About an hour later Roy burst into the shack, his face one huge grin.

"Hey, Willy!" he shouted boisterously. "Pack your grips and trunks, and make ready to flit!"

The corporal, who was standing by the stove playing the one-handed, culinary artist, spun round and faced Roy, an eager light in his eyes.

"Has the patrol got here so soon?" he asked quickly.

"Patrol nothing," retorted Roy. "How do you think they could have got here as early as this? Think they flew

up like birds? No, sir. I met a couple of Indians down on the lake. I had wandered down there to look for tracks when I discovered two figures far out on the ice. I shot three times to attract their attention, and they came breezing along, making good time. Didn't you hear me shoot? "

"I did," admitted Williams. "But I thought you were killing a moose."

"Well, I wasn't. As I remarked before, those two fellows came striding along pretty actively and energetically. And as soon as they got up to me we had a pow-wow. Anyhow, they told me they'd seen my SOS signal out on the lake and were on their way across to investigate. So they would have found us even if I hadn't happened to be down on the lake.

"However, they told me they had a trapping camp about thirty miles west of the lake, just beyond the hills. They'd been following up a moose-track since yesterday morning and hadn't caught up with Mr. Moose yet. That's how they happened to be here.

"Well, I spoilt their hunting trip good and proper. As soon as I heard they had two dog-trains at their camp I told them the time for play had gone, as there was a man's job ahead of them. I told them you were cooped up here with a busted shoulder. I put on quite a few airs and looked important," grinned Roy. "Told them it was important police business to get you out. They seemed impressed and in the right humble spirit. Anyhow, they promised to hike back to their camp as fast as their snow-shoes would take them, hitch up their dog-teams and return on the run. They said they would be here some time to-morrow evening. So we shall be able to start early in the morning day after to-morrow."

"Fine!" exclaimed the corporal. "But why did you order two dog-trains? One would have been more than enough."

"No, it wouldn't, because you're going to travel in

state," said Roy with a malicious grin. "We want to travel fast, and as you are still more than half a cripple, you'll have to ride in a sleigh so you won't hold up the procession."

"Oh, I say!" protested the corporal, dismay in his voice. "I could easily keep up with you. I don't like the idea of riding in like a squaw."

"Well, you'll have to pocket your pride, my lad," said Roy patronizingly. "You know yourself you shouldn't be able to make any time the state you're in. And you'll be snug and comfy. One of those fellows mentioned that he had a lynx-paw robe, so I ordered him to bring it along. They are also bringing along a caribou coat for you, and snow-shoes in case we meet any rough places where you'll have to walk. It's all settled, so it's not the slightest use for you to protest. I'm in charge of this expedition, so you'll have to obey orders."

"Oh, well, I suppose I shall have to, seeing you have set yourself up as the boss of the show," growled the corporal. "But riding in a sleigh . . ." He almost groaned at the idea of the indignity of it.

Shortly before dark on the following day the two Indians mushed in with their dog-trains. Each had a team of strong "Huskie" dogs.

There was an air of elation and festivity in the cabin that night. Both the corporal and Roy were overjoyed because their captivity and forced inactivity had come to an end so soon and unexpectedly. They were both eager and impatient to get down to Portage Bend to tackle those problems which awaited them there. Though in the case of the corporal his pleasure was tempered with a sense of regret.

They were early astir the next morning. Their kit and provisions were loaded into one sleigh, while the corporal was placed in the other, well wrapped up in the lynx robe and a caribou coat. He tried a last-hour protest. He

maintained with some force that he looked like a fool being wrapped up like a woman, and, what was even worse, he felt like one.

"Don't you worry," observed Roy, with an insulting and heartless grin. "You'll get used to it in time. And every fresh experience broadens our mind. Anyhow, you're going to ride in that sleigh like a good little boy!"

And in haughty silence the corporal had submitted to the inevitable.

So the party set out through the silent woods. The heavy sleighs had to be guided carefully down the rough ravine which sloped down from the camp to the lake. In places deep drifts of snow hampered their progress, and the men had to assist the dogs in pulling the sleighs clear.

But soon the lake lay before them, a wide expanse of white virgin snow, glittering and scintillating under a bright sun.

They were now able to speed up. The snow was not very deep on the ice, and there were no drifts to obstruct their passage. Roy and the two Indians took turn and turn about breaking trail for the dogs on the short, narrow snow-shoes used for the purpose. And by changing around frequently they were able to make excellent headway.

Soon the south end of the lake was reached, and they continued down the river, which formed a natural, though winding, trail southward.

Corporal Williams grumbled constantly at filling the rôle of inactive passenger. He complained that they "babied" him. Even at their nightly camping-places he was compelled to lead a life of ease and leisure. And his rather loud and forceful protests on that score went utterly unheeded.

Secretly, however, the disgruntled one had to admit to himself that it would have been impossible for him to keep up with the pace his companions were setting in his present semi-crippled condition.

The weather-gods seemed to be beaming benevolently on them. Day after day the same clear, pale blue wintry sky arched over their heads, and the sun shone brightly. But it was too low on the horizon to make its heat felt. The temperature kept low, and the slightest breeze had a biting, stinging nip to it. Corporal Williams was supremely thankful for both his caribou coat and the lynx robe, which kept him snug and warm where he sat in state in the leading sleigh.

Day after day they sped along, one man always in front breaking trail. But eventually they got down to more inhabited regions, where they found broken sleigh-trails, and they were able to increase their speed considerably.

Then one forenoon they came face to face with Constable Douglas and Alec Chaboye on the trail.

At first Douglas stared with incredulous, unbelieving eyes at the small party confronting him; but when he was at last quite convinced that he was not seeing things, and that two members of the party were actually the two men he had been sent out to find, he let out a "Whoop!" which aroused startled echoes in the deep forest around. He made a dash for the corporal, leaving Alec to take care of their dogs, which were all bristling with pugnacious intents, eager to pick a fight with the strange teams, who on their side appeared quite willing and eager to accommodate.

Douglas fretted and fussed over the corporal like a hen over a recovered, long-lost chick, and when he discovered the latter's crippled condition he almost wept. Williams, however, added a note of hard-boiled prose to the sentimental idyll by asking Douglas in a growl not to make a silly ass of himself. This sound, practical advice restored Douglas to a more or less normal condition. He demanded information, and was promptly treated to a brief, concise outline of past, recent history.

As soon as Douglas's avid curiosity had been satisfied,

he pounced on Roy, and alternately pumped that embarrassed youth's hand and patted him on the shoulder, while he loudly lauded him for the efficient way in which he had nursed the corporal back to life and health.

Roy could only stare at the effervescent constable in astonishment. This was not quite the reception he had expected from the latter. Douglas could not possibly know that he could prove his innocence as far as the crimes down in the town were concerned, so he had expected to be met with at least a touch of coldness and reserve as a murder suspect. But evidently little considerations like that carried no weight with the jovial constable. Or, perhaps, reflected Roy, the constable had forgotten his status in the excitement of the moment.

But even after the excitement seemed to have died, the constable forbore to mention the events which had sent the corporal out on the long trail in search of Roy. In fact, it was the corporal who first broached the subject. He asked Douglas if there had been any fresh developments during his absence.

But his natural curiosity was not satisfied. Douglas held up a warning hand, and said:

"Sorry, but that is a forbidden subject." He grinned as he spoke; but the corporal sensed the earnestness underlying his apparent flippancy.

"Why?" he asked, surprised.

"Inspector's orders," explained Douglas briefly. "We have strict instructions not to discuss that subject at all."

"But surely we can discuss it amongst ourselves," protested the corporal. "Those Indians don't understand English, and Alec is too far away to hear."

"Listen, old thing," said Douglas. "The inspector gave me emphatic instructions before I left that this particular subject was not to be discussed between us before he had a talk with you two. His orders were short and sweet. The inspector is getting darned mysterious, in fact. To

tell you the honest truth, I don't know myself exactly what he is up to or what's in his mind."

"I see," remarked the corporal, quietly thoughtful.

"What about me?" asked Roy a little diffidently. "I suppose I have to consider myself a prisoner."

Douglas grinned at him.

"My dear fellow, all I was told to do was to go out and find you two chaps and bring you safely back to Portage Bend. Further than that I have no instructions whatever regarding you."

Roy looked puzzled and a little bewildered; but the corporal looked quickly up at Douglas, eagerness and excitement in his face. There must have been some fresh developments, he decided in his own mind. He knew the inspector and his ways, and when the latter began being mysterious, he had some strong cards up his sleeve. And in some way the inspector must have found out that Roy was innocent, or else he would certainly have issued distinct and strict orders with regard to Roy's exact status. But in view of the inspector's emphatic decree any discussion of these matters was, of course, decidedly out of the question. He would have to nurse his curiosity till they got to town.

"But say, Douglas," spoke up Roy anxiously, "do you know if my sister is all right?"

"Right as rain," was the immediate answer. "She's been staying with the Westons since you left."

"What!" exclaimed Roy, staring at the constable. "Do you mean, she's been staying with the inspector and his wife all this time?"

Douglas nodded his head.

"Quite correct, old thing. You hit the bull's-eye the first time," grinned Douglas. "Under the circumstances Mrs. Weston refused to let her stay by herself. You see what I mean?"

"That was dam' decent of Mr. and Mrs. Weston," murmured Roy a little huskily, turning his face away to

hide his emotion. "That was—that was dam' decent," he repeated lamely, unable to find adequate expression for his feelings just then.

"Just the sort of thing you'd expect them to do," observed the corporal softly from his sleigh, his eyes bright.

There was a somewhat awkward pause for some moments, but in the end Douglas came to the rescue of Roy, who was fighting hard to regain his self-control.

"I think we'd better get a move on," he suggested. "The day is still young, so we can cut down a slice of the distance between here and town before night if we get a hustle on."

One of the hired Indians was sent home with one dog-train, while the other was retained to carry the corporal right in to Portage Bend on his sleigh. The police-dogs were turned around, and soon the small cavalcade was driving rapidly down the trail.

Eight days later they drove into Portage Bend. Douglas, who had taken charge of the expedition, timed their arrival for late in the evening. He explained the inspector had given him orders to drive into town as quietly and unobtrusively as possible. And if they arrived at a late hour, there would hardly be any chance of their being observed. Few people would be out in the streets on a cold night.

As soon as the two teams had stopped in front of the barracks, the two remaining members of the detachment came pelting through the door, and they executed an impromptu Indian war-dance when they discovered that the prodigals had indeed returned.

The travellers were triumphantly guided into the barrack-room, where Constables Wentworth and Wrenn stumbled over each other in their well-meant efforts to make them comfortable.

"Now, tell us all that's happened," cried Wrenn eagerly, when the new-comers were at last settled.

"No, you won't," interrupted Wentworth. "You'll hike right over to the inspector's happy home, Wrenn, and give him the glad news that the dear departed have been resurrected. And make it snappy!"

"Oh, but say," protested Wrenn, "let me just have a brief summary, as it were, before I buzz off. How'd you come to bust your shoulder, Corporal?"

But before the corporal had time to answer, Wentworth took the floor again.

"Listen, young Wrenn." He spoke haughtily from the lofty peak of two years' seniority. "You seem to forget that I'm acting corporal just now. When I say 'go,' you jolly well get a hustle on. If you as much as bat an eyelash in protest, I'll have you court-martialled and shot at dawn. Besides, you seem to have forgotten that the inspector left strict orders to be informed immediately the prodigals returned, no matter what time of day or night it might be. So if there's any delay, he'll probably have a few words to say about it. And they won't be good to hear. So off you buzz!"

And Wrenn buzzed. Though he was grumbling to himself with vim and zest as he followed his scowling, disappointed face out of the room.

A scant fifteen minutes later he returned with Inspector Weston. The inspector went straight to his office, while Wrenn came into the barrack-room and informed the corporal and Roy that Weston wanted to see them at once.

Roy followed the corporal along the corridor in some trepidation. He wondered what would happen during the forthcoming interview. He knew he could clear himself from implication in the major crimes; but there was still that matter of smuggling and attack against the police against him. So he felt a little uneasy.

The inspector received them with a cheerful wave of his hand.

"Here you are at last!" he exclaimed. "And I'll confess I'm dashed glad to see you both. I've been worrying a lot about you chaps. Couldn't understand what had happened to you. Wrenn told me you had broken your collar-bone, Corporal. Sorry to hear about that. How's the fracture getting along?"

"Quite well, sir," answered Williams with a smile. "Bancroft set the broken bone and bandaged me up in great style. A doctor couldn't have made a better job of it, sir."

"Excellent," commented Weston. "By the way, Bancroft, Joan sends her love. It bucked her up no end to hear that you were back safely. She was beginning to get anxious. She has been visiting us for a while."

"I heard about that, Inspector, and I want to thank you for your kindness in looking after her," murmured Roy awkwardly. "I really can't say how grateful I am to you and Mrs. Weston."

The inspector waved his thanks aside with his hand.

"Don't mention it," he said with a smile. "The pleasure has been ours. Joan has been jolly good company for my wife and young Dick. We shall be sorry when she leaves us. Now close the door and sit down here by my desk, both of you. I want to hear about your adventures first, and then we'll proceed to business. You first, Corporal," he nodded when they were both seated.

The corporal at once began his story about what had happened since he left Portage Bend. He told how he had wasted more than a week through losing his way, told about the difficulties he had experienced in locating Roy's camp, passed lightly over his mishap out in the woods and his subsequent torturing trip into camp. Then he explained how he had found himself trapped by the freeze-up when he again awoke to consciousness, and gave such a glowing and enthusiastic description of how Roy

had nursed him and looked after him that the latter squirmed uncomfortably in his chair. He ended his story by recounting how Roy had found the two Indians down on Swan Lake, and gave a brief description of their trip in to Portage Bend.

"And now, sir," he said quietly when he had finished his story, "I want to state that I'm absolutely convinced that Bancroft had nothing whatever to do with Sergeant Ware's death or the outrage at the bank. In fact, he has an indisputable alibi as far as that affair at the bank is concerned."

"Well, we'll discuss all that later," remarked the inspector. "First I want to hear Bancroft's story." He turned to Roy, his face grave. "Now I want to hear why you left town so hurriedly and secretly, and what actually led up to it. Especially what led up to it. I want you to understand that just now I'm not listening to you as a police officer, but as your friend," he added, with one of his ready smiles.

"It makes no difference to me whether you listen to me in your official capacity or not," answered Roy quietly. "I was going to make a clean breast of the whole business anyhow. I know I shall put myself in bad, but I don't mind that as long as I can help catching the devil who tried to throw the blame for Sergeant Ware's murder on me. And talking things over up in my shack the corporal told me that if you were told everything it might help you to get a line on the real criminal. So here goes."

Roy made a frank, unreserved confession of all his dealings with the smugglers, and of all that had transpired while he was a member of the gang. And he told how he had decided to quit the gang after his encounter with the corporal and Wrenn out in the woods. He described his interview with Tyson, their quarrel, Tyson's threats, and how he had decided to sneak quietly out of town.

He also mentioned how Tyson had helped his secret scheme by suggesting that Roy should start out on a scouting expedition to try to find a new route for their shipments of booze.

During Roy's recital the inspector several times nodded his head, as if he had found confirmation for preconceived theories. When the former had finished speaking, the inspector thought for a few minutes, then he said:

"You told me just now that both Tyson and his clerk knew that you were leaving town that night. Are you quite sure?" he asked.

"Oh, absolutely. They both knew I was going, but they didn't know where I was going," answered Roy with a grin.

"And what were you told in Tyson's office the morning after the murder, Corporal, when you went down to make inquiries for Bancroft?" asked Weston.

"I was told they didn't know where Roy was, sir. At least, Crane told me that. Mr. Tyson was out somewhere. Crane told me I should probably find Roy at home," answered the corporal.

"Then Crane was lying," broke in Roy hotly. "He certainly knew I had left town. Or, at least, that I intended to go."

"It certainly does look as if he was trifling slightly with truth," admitted Weston, "but you must remember that your mission was to be secret and confidential, so to speak, so I suppose he thought an evasion was indicated. Now listen to me, you chaps. I know you're tired after your long spell on the trail, but even so, it is absolutely necessary that I have a long talk with you both. I have a lot to say to you and several things to discuss with you, so be as attentive as you possibly can. Though I think I can promise you that I shall be able to keep you interested," he added with a chuckle.

CHAPTER XIII

THE WINNING TRICK

THE day after the excitement of Portage Bend's citizens had been aroused by the will-o'-the-wisp appearance and disappearance of Corporal Williams and Roy Bancroft, the *Portage Bend Gazette*, the town's semi-weekly contribution to the world press, issued an extra, and the good, and bad, citizens read the article under the heavy headlines on the front page with voracious appetites.

"NEW DEVELOPMENT IN MURDER CASES

"POLICE HOPES TO HAVE MYSTERY COMPLETELY SOLVED IN NEAR FUTURE

"As will be known to the majority of our readers, Corporal Williams of the local R.N.W.M.P. Detachment started out on a patrol late in the fall to locate a young gentleman from this town, who was believed by the Police to be an important witness in the two fiendish crimes which some months ago shocked and horrified our quiet, law-abiding community. Corporal Williams returned to this town the night before last accompanied by Mr. Roy Bancroft, the witness in question. The two gentlemen proceeded to Prince Albert yesterday morning to lay certain information before the Police Authorities there. Corporal Williams had suffered a fracture to his right shoulder by an accident which occurred during a heavy storm he met with during his patrol.

"One of our representatives called on Inspector Weston at his office yesterday, and the inspector was kind enough to give our representative the following exclusive information :

" 'The fact is established beyond reasonable doubt,' said the inspector, 'that the same hand which felled Mitchell, the night watchman at the bank, also killed Sergeant Ware. So if we establish the identity of the one we also automatically establish the identity of the other. Now we know that at least two men were involved in the outrage at the bank, and we further know that one of those involved was an expert safe-cracker. We have recently been furnished with the description of an individual who was staying here in town around the time of the bank robbery, and this description tallies in every detail with that of a cracksman from one of our big cities, who is well known to the Police Force of that city. The detectives in the city in question are now making an extensive search for that man, and they hope to apprehend him very shortly. As soon as he is found I have no doubt that we shall be able to establish the identity of the man who slew Mitchell and Sergeant Ware.'

"So far Inspector Weston. It is to be hoped that the efforts of our efficient Police Force will be crowned with speedy and complete success, so that this dark page in the annals of our fair and flourishing town can be closed for ever."

This article made a further stir in the already agitated atmosphere of the little town. All were pleased with the editor's flattering remarks about the town. Up to now quite a few had had the suspicion that the town was inclined to be "tough," but now they read in black and white that their suspicion had been quite unworthy.

But most people were irritated because Roy Bancroft

had been considerably and delicately alluded to as "an important witness." What did the fool paper mean by that? they asked each other with quite some heat. Why not call him by the proper term instead of covering it up under some fancy name? Hadn't Roy Bancroft been arrested for murder and been put in the Prince Albert Jail? So why all this fancy stuff? They sounded quite pained and disgusted.

And where had the police got the description of that safe-cracker? Nobody had heard about such a fellow before, though the affair had been discussed throughout the town till it was worn threadbare. And if they had heard nothing about him, how had the police found out about him? Roy Bancroft wouldn't have told them, except he was more of a fool than they gave him credit for. No man would be fool enough to slip the noose around his own neck, if he didn't want to commit suicide, that was.

The whole situation was as intriguing and unsatisfactory as ever. Though there were a few who nodded their heads sagely and hinted vaguely that there was more to the whole business than met the eye. But when pressed for information, they looked deep and mysterious, and muttered virtuously that it was not up to them to open their mouths when the police evidently wanted to keep matters dark for the time being.

There was quite a lot of acrimonious grumbling and growling against the reticence of the police. The citizens firmly considered themselves entitled to a full loaf, and the police had only handed out a few indigestible crumbs, was their querulous complaint. But as all attempts to pump the tight-lipped members of the detachment had proved signal failures, all they could do was to await further developments with what patience they could muster. If that article in the *Gazette* was right, something ought to happen very soon.

But the developments seemed to hang fire. At least, so it seemed to the restless, impatient townspeople. A week had passed after that article had appeared, and they were well into the next and still nothing had happened. And people began openly to assert that the police had fallen down completely on their job.

But the members of the detachment went about their business quiet and silent, and paid no attention to either covert or more open innuendoes and sly digs.

One morning, a little before ten o'clock, Constable Douglas appeared in Mr. Tyson's office with a request from Inspector Weston that Mr. Tyson and Mr. Crane step over to his office, as he had an urgent and important matter to discuss with the two gentlemen.

Tyson looked up at Constable Douglas with a keen frown, which was put on to cover his uneasiness.

"What's it all about, Douglas?" he asked.

"When the inspector issues an order, he seldom follows it up with long-winded explanations," answered Douglas with a grin. "But as it happens, I have an idea why he wants to see you. It's about that murder business. Some matters have cropped up, and he wants some information about Roy Bancroft."

"What sort of information?" asked Tyson, a little uncomfortably.

"I don't know exactly. Just general, I think, seeing he worked for you," said Douglas. "But will you gentlemen please come along with me at once? The inspector is waiting, and he told me the matter was urgent."

"Well, I suppose we'd better go along," suggested Tyson, looking at Crane.

"Most certainly. I shouldn't like to keep the inspector waiting," said Crane punctiliously.

They put on their fur coats and hats, and strode along with Douglas towards the barracks, quite a few

curious eyes following them as they passed along the streets.

When they entered the inspector's office they found him issuing some instructions to Constable Wrenn, but he broke off as soon as he became aware of his visitors.

"Just wait here till I'm through with these gentlemen, Wrenn," he said, then, turning to the new-comers: "Good morning, gentlemen. Sorry to bother you this time of the day, but my business with you is urgent and couldn't wait. Please take off your coats and sit down." He indicated two chairs facing his desk.

Constable Douglas took their coats and hats from the visitors and put them on pegs on the wall near the door, and the two men sat down in the chairs the inspector had indicated.

Tyson felt distinctly uncomfortable. He noticed that Douglas remained in the room, and he sensed a certain tension in the atmosphere which filled him with uneasiness. He didn't like the look of things. The presence of the two constables gave a disturbing court-room effect to the office, and Tyson suddenly realized that his conscience was not all a good conscience should be.

But Mr. Crane appeared quite calm and undisturbed. He looked more like a college professor than ever. He faced the inspector with the calm aspect of one to whom the proceedings would be merely of academic interest.

"Mr. Tyson," began Inspector Weston abruptly, looking gravely at his visitor, "in the forenoon of the day young Bancroft disappeared from town, he had an interview with you in your office and you quarrelled."

Tyson started in his chair and looked extremely ill at ease.

"It could hardly be called a quarrel," he murmured. "Merely a difference of opinion."

"We won't squabble over the exact term," observed Weston dryly. "It's immaterial, as far as what I want

to find out is concerned. Now, during that interview, did Bancroft smoke his pipe? "

"Smoke his pipe?" repeated Tyson, looking completely bewildered.

"Yes. Can you remember if Bancroft smoked during that interview? "

"Really," murmured Mr. Tyson deprecatingly, "it's so long ago that I hardly remember."

"Well, please try as hard as you can to remember every incident which took place during that interview," said Weston gravely. "It's of the greatest importance. Take your time and think hard. Perhaps recollection will come to you after a while."

For some moments Tyson sat in frowning thought, and the room was silent. On this silence suddenly broke the blast of a distant train-whistle, which announced that the train which linked Portage Bend up with the rest of the world three times per week via Portage Junction was approaching the end of its run.

Gradually Tyson's face cleared. He had always boasted that he had an excellent memory, and to his satisfaction he found that in this instance he would be able to prove his boast. The details of what had occurred in his office that morning were coming back to him, surprisingly clear.

"I remember now, Inspector," he announced, a note of complacent triumph in his voice. "Roy Bancroft actually did smoke that morning. Or rather, I remember distinctly that while we were talking he pulled out his pipe and tobacco-pouch and began filling his pipe."

"And did Bancroft return the pouch to his pocket? "

"He did not," declared Tyson, delighted at this opportunity of proving the outstanding excellence of his memory. "He placed his pouch on his knee while he searched his pockets for a match."

"Now be quite sure that you don't make any mistake in answering my next question," continued Weston.

"During that interview Bancroft took umbrage at something you said, and he jumped up from his chair in a rage. What happened to the tobacco-pouch then?"

Mr. Tyson hesitated only for a second.

"I can tell you that, Inspector," he said eagerly, thoroughly pleased with himself. "It dropped to the floor. I remember watching it drop, in a detached way, as it were."

"And did Bancroft recover it before he left your office?"

"No, I don't think so. In fact I'm quite sure he didn't. He left the office in a huff a few moments later, and never stooped to recover his pouch."

"And did you pick up the pouch, Mr. Tyson?"

"I did not. I grabbed my hat and raced after Bancroft to reason with him. I didn't want to have any quarrel or misunderstanding with him."

"I see. So the tobacco-pouch was left lying on the floor. Was it still there when you returned to your office?"

Mr. Tyson thought for a moment.

"I don't think so. In fact, I'm fairly convinced it was not. If it had been I should have noticed it."

"H'm," grunted the inspector. "And where was Mr. Crane when all this took place?"

"He was out of the office for the moment. He came in just as I rushed out after Bancroft. In fact, we actually collided in the doorway."

"Now, Mr. Crane, can you tell me what happened to that tobacco-pouch?" asked Weston, turning to his second visitor. "Was it lying on the floor when you entered the office?"

Mr. Crane shook his head.

"To the best of my belief it was not," he said slowly and reflectively. "At least, if it was I didn't see it."

"You are quite sure of that?"

"Yes, sir. Quite positive."

"How long were you away from the office when you ran after Bancroft, Mr. Tyson?" asked Weston.

"About ten or fifteen minutes, I should say. I caught up with Bancroft half a block down the street. We stood chatting for a while. In fact, we settled that small dispute of ours, and we were once more on friendly terms when we parted. I went straight back to my office. It could hardly have been more than ten minutes or thereabout between the time I left till I returned."

"Did any person call at the office during Mr. Tyson's brief absence?" inquired Weston of Mr. Crane.

"Really, sir," answered Crane deprecatingly, "I can't quite remember. It's so long ago. But somebody may have visited the office, of course, during Mr. Tyson's absence."

"We can easily settle that question," declared Weston. "You said, Mr. Tyson, that you stood talking to Bancroft half a block down the street. Could you see the entrance to your office from where you were standing?"

"As it happened, I could. My face was turned that way."

"And did you see any person enter or leave your office while you were standing there?"

"No, I did not. And I certainly should have noticed any person entering or leaving, so I'm certain nobody visited my office during my absence."

"Very well, that creates a rather peculiar situation," remarked Weston quietly. "Bancroft drops his tobacco-pouch in your office, Mr. Tyson. He rushes off and leaves the pouch lying on the floor. You, Mr. Tyson, rush after Bancroft with the pouch still on the floor. The next second you, Mr. Crane, enter the office and the pouch has disappeared!"

"Excuse me, sir," interposed Mr. Crane deferentially. "I didn't state the pouch had disappeared. I merely said

I hadn't seen it. It may have been lying there even so, because my eyesight is rather poor, so I might easily have missed it."

"But Mr. Tyson's eyesight is obviously not poor," insinuated Weston. "And when he returned about ten minutes later the pouch was gone. It had simply disappeared without a trace, as if it had been spirited away."

"May I suggest, sir, that Bancroft recovered his pouch when he visited the office during the afternoon of the same day?" ventured Mr. Crane.

"You may suggest nothing of the sort," answered Weston shortly. "I know for a fact that Bancroft did *not* recover his pouch. So the situation is this: Bancroft's tobacco-pouch disappears mysteriously from Mr. Tyson's office, right under the noses of you two gentlemen, and the following morning," continued Weston, leaning forward in his chair and fixing the two squarely with his eyes, "the next morning, I say, it is found beside the murdered body of Sergeant Ware!"

He made an impressive pause, never for a moment taking his stern, unwavering gaze off his two visitors. Mr. Crane looked straight back at him, a gleam of curiosity and attention in his eyes; but Mr. Tyson stirred uneasily in his chair, and his face began to show signs of vivid agitation.

"What—what exactly are you driving at, Inspector?" he muttered unsteadily.

Just then they heard a slight commotion in the front office. It sounded as if several men had entered, and that they had started a low-voiced conversation. But the inspector paid no attention to it.

"What I'm driving at is this," he said gravely. "As we can safely assume that the tobacco-pouch was not spirited away from your office through some supernatural agency, the only conclusion we can draw is that the pouch

was picked up by a human being. And for obvious reasons we can also assume that the hand which picked up the pouch from the floor of Mr. Tyson's office also placed it where it was found. And we can further draw the conclusion that *that hand also killed Sergeant Ware*.

"According to your explanation no stranger entered the office from the time Bancroft dropped his pouch till it disappeared. Consequently we can only come to one conclusion, *that one of you two picked up the pouch*," he ended with even, impressive emphasis.

Mr. Crane looked quite calm and unruffled.

"Well, I can only reiterate what I said before," he said quietly. "I never saw the pouch, and I can offer no further explanation of the mystery." But his eyes strayed for a moment to Mr. Tyson, and there was a queer look of sympathy in them.

Mr. Tyson's usually florid face had gone pasty white, and his eyes bulged with fear.

"Do—do you mean to imply," he stuttered wildly, "that you suspect one of us of having committed the murder?"

But the inspector didn't answer. Unnoticed by the others he had given a sign to Constable Wentworth, who a moment before had appeared in the open doorway leading to the corridor. The constable had immediately retired. And now Weston was looking past his visitors at a strange procession which had at that moment entered the office and was standing just inside the doorway.

A strange corporal and constable held a handcuffed man between them. The prisoner was a rather undersized individual, with a hatchet face and sharp, hard features. His bright, ferrety eyes were set rather close together. Just now he was scowling in truculent defiance at the inspector.

Tyson and Crane turned their heads to see what was holding the inspector's interest.

As soon as the prisoner discovered Crane his face went almost livid with sudden, ungovernable passion.

"You dam'd double-crossing swine!" he screamed, trying frantically to break away from the officers' firm grip. "I'll tear your heart out of you, you . . . !"

With an oath Crane jumped to his feet, his chair crashing to the floor. His hand flashed inside the lapel of his coat, but at the same moment Constables Douglas and Wrenn hurled themselves at him.

For a few hectic, chaotic moments a cyclone seemed to have hit the office. The two constables had carried Crane with them to the floor in the impetuosity of their rush, and the latter writhed and twisted, and fought with nails and teeth like a raging wild-cat. But both constables had been up against similar propositions in the past, and soon they had their foaming, frothing prisoner pinned to the floor. Constable Wentworth came running up with a pair of handcuffs, which he snapped around Crane's wrists.

"Search him!" ordered Weston briefly.

Wentworth went through the clothes of the prostrate man, while Douglas and Wrenn kept him quiet. The former pulled out an automatic pistol from a shoulder holster, and from a specially prepared pocket in the lining of the prisoner's coat a short length of gas-pipe, strapped around with leather, and weighted in one end by a lump of lead. A vicious, deadly weapon in the hands of a reasonably strong man.

These lethal weapons he placed on the inspector's desk along with a well-filled pocket-book, a watch and a few other articles he had found on the prisoner.

When Wentworth once more bent over the prisoner, and carefully went over his clothes with his hands to make sure that he had missed nothing, he noticed some peculiar bulges around Crane's waist. In spite of the latter's frantic attempts to wriggle and squirm, Wentworth unceremoniously opened his waistcoat, pulled his shirt and under-vest

up to his chin, and lay bare a leather belt strapped around Crane's waist. He unbuckled the belt and handed it to the inspector.

"That's all, sir," he reported.

Weston nodded, and took the belt in his hand.

"Rearrange his clothes for him," he ordered, and then began to examine the belt.

Along its full length it was furnished with pockets, and from these pockets Weston drew out sheaves of bank-notes, quite a few of them of large denominations. These latter he compared with a list lying before him on his desk. From one pocket he drew out a bundle of folded securities, and these he also compared with his list.

When he had finished he nodded his head.

"The evidence is conclusive," he remarked. "The numbers on the larger notes are identical with the numbers of part of the notes missing from the safe at the bank. And the same applies to the securities. It was Crane who organized the attack on the bank, and who murdered both Mitchell and Sergeant Ware. And this," he continued, picking up the bludgeon from his desk, "is in all probability the weapon he used. Wrap it up carefully, Douglas. I have no doubt our chemical experts will find traces of human blood on it when they examine it.

"Remove the prisoners," he continued. "But keep them closely guarded. On no occasion must they be given any opportunity for private communication. They will be arraigned before the magistrate this afternoon, and if committed for trial they will both go down to Prince Albert on to-morrow's train."

The office was soon empty except for the inspector and Mr. Tyson. The latter had been a spell-bound, open-mouthed witness to the dramatic events, which had developed with such startling, unexpected suddenness.

"I suppose you don't require my presence here any longer, inspector?" he asked with an attempt at breeziness,

which he was far from feeling. In fact he was badly shaken, and he felt an urgent and immediate desire for a long, strong drink, the longer and stronger the better.

"I'm not quite through with you yet, Mr. Tyson," said Weston quietly. "Sit down. I have several things to say to you."

Mr. Tyson sat down, uneasy and apprehensive eyes on the inspector. Evidently he wasn't out of the woods yet, he realized with considerable dismay.

"Now, Mr. Tyson," began Weston brusquely, "I'm going to surprise you by telling you that I knew Crane was guilty before I asked you to come over here. My motive for our meeting was to find out whether you, Mr. Tyson, were implicated in the crimes."

"You—you suspected me of being an accomplice?" stammered Tyson, pulling out his handkerchief and dabbing his wet brow.

Weston nodded.

"During our investigations I found it convenient to look up your past life, and some of the things I found out were not especially—flattering, let us say—to your character. For instance, you opened a real-estate office in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, during the real-estate boom down in that town, and your operations were not all above suspicion. To be quite candid, I know that you escaped imprisonment by a hairs-breadth. You were actually so badly involved that you found it convenient to leave the town in a hurry without leaving any forwarding address. So naturally I looked on you with quite a lot of suspicion. Only your readiness and willingness to prove that Bancroft had actually lost his tobacco-pouch in your office saved you from being arrested as an accessory. If you had been in any way involved, you would naturally have denied ever having seen that pouch anywhere near your office. So I decided you were quite innocent."

"Thank the Lord for that!" exclaimed the distressed Mr. Tyson fervently.

"But that's not all I have to say to you," continued Weston. "Your connection with the booze-smuggling, which has been pestering us for some time back, is known to us in its smallest detail. We even know the name of every one of your associates and underlings."

Tyson started violently in his chair. His lower jaw sagged and his eyes bulged. This was even worse than he had expected. But he never uttered a word. He was too badly demoralized and shaken to attempt any subterfuge and prevarication. Instead, he again had recourse to his handkerchief.

"Now, for reasons which do not concern you, we have decided to drop that case," continued Weston with a contemptuous look at the squirming wretch in the chair, who brightened visibly, however, at the inspector's words. "But let me give you a word of warning, Mr. Tyson. From now on your every step will be watched with our closest attention, and if we ever have the faintest suspicion that you are tampering with the law in any way, you'll be arrested promptly. In fact, if I were you, I think I should move to some other community. I think you would find it more congenial and healthy. That's all, Mr. Tyson. Good morning."

As a man in a daze Mr. Tyson got up from his chair, donned his fur coat and hat, and left the office without uttering a word.

On his way out he passed through the front office, and he shuddered when he discovered Crane and the other prisoner occupying a cell each, with an alert constable watching every move they made. He realized by what a narrow margin he had escaped sharing their captivity.

He hurried out, and drew a deep breath of relief when he was once more in the street. He had certainly had a narrow escape, he told himself with a slight shiver.

As he strode along he began to lean more and more towards the conviction that the inspector's parting advice to him had been sound. And after he had turned matters over in his head a little longer, he was firmly convinced of it!

CHAPTER XIV

INSPECTOR WESTON EXPLAINS

THE following forenoon, shortly after the train had left Portage Bend Depot for its run south, Inspector Weston was closeted in his office with the editor of the *Portage Bend Gazette*, Mr. Grantley.

The two prisoners had appeared before the local magistrate the preceding afternoon, had been duly committed for trial, and had been sent down to Prince Albert on the train under a strong escort.

Mr. Grantley was a serious-visaged, spare little man, with big-lensed, tortoise-rimmed glasses, almost the size of a ship's portholes. He had been pleading with the inspector to grant him an interview as soon as the rumour of the dramatic events which had occurred at the barracks on the preceding day had begun to circulate in town. And when Weston promised to give him the full story as soon as the prisoners had left town, little Mr. Grantley almost wept with gratitude.

"From the first," began Weston, "I doubted that young Bancroft had murdered Sergeant Ware, in spite of the apparently damning circumstantial evidence against him, the discovery of his tobacco-pouch beside the body and his sudden and mysterious disappearance. I knew the young man fairly well, and I couldn't quite see him in the rôle of the ruthless, brutal fiend who had engineered these crimes. You see, we were quite convinced that there was

a close connection between that affair at the bank and the murder of Ware.

"And during the afternoon of the day on which we found Ware's body I got proof positive that Bancroft was innocent. Angus McKenzie, who had heard rumours about the suspicions directed against Bancroft, came to my office, and he could give me some very interesting information.

"He told me that Bancroft had started up-river a little after five o'clock on the preceding afternoon with a heavily loaded canoe, and, what was far more important, some friend of his from up-river, who had come in around midnight, had actually seen Bancroft at his camp about fifteen miles up the river around ten o'clock. Now you can see for yourself that it was impossible for Bancroft to be fifteen miles up the river at ten and then commit murder here in town around midnight. So that let Bancroft out.

"I was now quite positive that some other person had committed the murder, and that he had made an attempt to fasten the crime on Bancroft. But I kept this new development to myself, and I also requested Angus to see that nothing leaked out about it. As long as the real criminal thought that our attention was solely concentrated on Bancroft, he would be less alert.

"I told Miss Bancroft, though, that her brother had been cleared of all suspicion, and also told her my reasons for wanting to keep it quiet. It wasn't quite fair to Bancroft, of course, but under the circumstances it was the only sensible thing to do. Miss Bancroft quite agreed with my point of view, and gave me full permission to go on with my plans my own way.

"I now tried to trace the man who had gained possession of Bancroft's tobacco-pouch, firmly convinced that he would be the murderer. I suspected that Bancroft had accidentally left his pouch somewhere and that the murderer had picked it up.

" From Miss Bancroft I gathered the information that she had seen the tobacco-pouch in her brother's possession on the morning of the day he left town. And she further informed me that she was practically certain that Bancroft had not visited any other place but Mr. Tyson's office that day. So that made it very probable that it was in Tyson's office Bancroft had left his pouch.

" That directed my suspicions towards Tyson and Crane. I secretly got two detectives up here to shadow them; but they could find out nothing which tended to prove that my suspicions were justified.

" Then at last Corporal Williams and Bancroft returned. And Bancroft could confirm his sister's previous statements about his movements the day he left town, which was, of course, the day that Sergeant Ware was murdered. And during a chat I had with him the night he and Williams returned, I established the fact that he had actually left his pouch in Tyson's office. And another significant point was, that the only persons in town who knew that Bancroft would be out of town that night, and that he might have difficulties in proving an alibi, were, apart from his sister, Messrs. Tyson and Crane!

" Well, that strengthened my case, and I decided to set a trap for the murderer. But I needed Bancroft's co-operation, and that he was glad and eager to render. His somewhat inglorious part in my scheme was to continue in his rôle as suspect and proceed to Prince Albert, apparently under arrest. I sent Williams and him out on the gasoline trolley we keep down at the depot early on the following morning. You see I had to get Bancroft out of the way. I couldn't very well lock him up in a cell under the circumstances, and if I let him run around loose, people would begin to wonder and perhaps suspect the truth. Anyhow," remarked Weston with a smile, " the young cub looked too darn cheerful for a man arrested for murder. I may add that I arranged for Bancroft to be sworn in as a special

constable as from the day Corporal Williams turned up at his camp. The pay he would draw would be a slight compensation for having his trapping plans completely wrecked by us.

"As soon as they were well away I got hold of you, Mr. Grantley, and gave you some information for your paper. I have to confess that most of what I told you was bluff. We had not been furnished with any description of a suspicious individual, as I stated. But we felt certain such a person existed. It was purely a piece of bluff I put in for the murderer's benefit. I knew he would read it, and suspected he might become uneasy and want to warn his accomplice in the bank robbery to make himself scarce, so the police couldn't find him.

"The ruse worked. I must mention that we had placed a detective in the local post office to keep an eye on all correspondence emanating from Tyson or Crane. And one day we were informed that Crane had forwarded a suspicious-looking letter to one Mr. Joseph Carrigan at a Winnipeg address. The Winnipeg police, acting on our instructions, called on Mr. Carrigan, and discovered an old acquaintance. He was known in the underworld as Twelvefinger Joe. The sobriquet had been bestowed on him as a tribute to the dexterous use he made of the ten digits furnished him by Nature. His speciality was opening other people's safes, neatly, quickly and efficiently.

"Twelvefinger was at once subjected to a severe examination. I'm afraid that during that examination the police treated Truth a little nonchalantly. To be quite candid, Twelvefinger was given to understand that Crane had been arrested for that affair at the bank, that he had made a full confession, and that he had thrown the blame for Mitchell's death on Twelvefinger.

"When he heard this Twelvefinger flew into an insane, unreasoning rage, and before he quite realized what he was doing he had made a full confession about the bank robbery.

"According to Twelfefinger, Crane was a notorious Chicago crook, known as Killer Thrak. He was intelligent and had evidently had an excellent education. What his real name was, or what had started him on a career of crime, Twelfefinger didn't know. The latter had made Thrak's acquaintance while he had been operating for a short time in Chicago, and had been associated with him in several crimes in that city. Thrak was a master hand at organizing burglaries and hold-ups, and he never shrank from taking active part in carrying them out. According to Twelfefinger, he was utterly ruthless, and a cold-blooded ruffian who stopped at nothing, and to whom the value of human life was negligible. Apparently he had served a long term in the penitentiary for manslaughter.

"But at last Chicago had grown too hot for Thrak, and he had slipped across to Canada right under the noses of the detectives who were frantically looking for him. And he made a clean get-away. He drifted up to Winnipeg, where he again met Twelfefinger. For a consideration the latter agreed to help Thrak to find a temporary place of refuge, as he had decided to lie low for a while. It seems that the police down in the States were raising heaven and earth to find Killer Thrak, as he was wanted on several grave charges, including murder.

"Thrak was well supplied with money, and for a time he kept in hiding, while he made a few small changes in his appearance. He grew a beard, adorned his face with a pair of thick-lensed glasses, and Killer Thrak made his reappearance in the world as the respectable, studious-looking Mr. Crane. He informed Twelfefinger that he decided to lead a quiet life for a few years, to give the police a chance of forgetting him.

"Why he choose this town as a place of retirement we don't know. But, as you know, he appeared here and got a job as clerk with Mr. Tyson. And there is no doubt that he was an efficient and able office-man.

"Then one day Twelfefinger got a letter from Crane, saying the latter had planned a coup and that he required Twelfefinger's professional assistance, so would Twelfefinger come up to Portage Bend at once. And Twelfefinger went. He knew that Thrak, or Crane, never bothered about anything but really well-paying propositions. Crane had given him explicit instructions as to how to deport himself up here. He was to pose as a prospective fur-buyer, who wanted to get in touch with trappers before the season started. On no account must he let it appear in public that he knew Crane. All their conferences took place at Crane's place late at night, when Twelfefinger could slip in unnoticed.

"Crane's scheme was short and simple. He wanted to relieve the bank safe of its contents. He had been planning the coup for some time, and now his plans were ripe to put into execution. In a few days there was to be a Russian feast in town, and it was the evening of that day Crane had selected for his coup. He knew these feasts generally grew boisterous and riotous as the evening progressed, and that usually the police had to intervene. But Crane was not leaving anything to chance. He intended to make quite sure that the attention of the police, and the rest of the town for that matter, should be concentrated on that feast. For that purpose he had arranged to have several cases of booze sent down to that feast, to help liven things up. How he had arranged that, Twelfefinger didn't know. But most likely Crane had got hold of a team on some pretext or other, had disguised himself as a teamster, and had delivered the booze himself.

"On the appointed night Twelfefinger was to hide himself near the premises of the bank, while Crane was to watch developments at the feast. As soon as things got lively, and Crane had seen the police arrive, he was to pick up Twelfefinger and proceed with the rest of the programme.

"They were to go straight to the bank, and while Twelfefinger was hiding in the shadows by the entrance Crane was to knock at the door. As soon as Mitchell came to investigate, Crane was to pretend that he had been taken suddenly ill while out for a stroll, that he was on the point of fainting, and ask Mitchell to let him come in and sit down for a while till he recovered. Crane had for some time deliberately cultivated a friendship with Mitchell, and by this time they were on the best of terms. And Crane knew the kind-hearted watchman would at once fall for an appeal like that. As soon as Mitchell opened the door Twelfefinger was to slip through the opening, grab Mitchell to prevent him from crying out, while Crane stunned him with a black-jack. Twelfefinger insisted that there had been no talk of killing Mitchell. He had not even known that the night watchman was dead before it was all over. But Twelfefinger's statement is open to suspicion. He would know that Crane did not intend to let Mitchell live after he had openly divulged his identity.

"Well, their dastardly, blood-thirsty plot was carried out without a hitch, as you know. The next day Twelfefinger got his half of the booty, and slipped out of town as quietly and unobtrusively as he had entered.

"That was Twelfefinger's story. Of course, we could have arrested Crane straight away, but I wanted to confront him with his accomplice before he knew he was even under suspicion. I didn't want to give his active and fertile brains a chance of fabricating a story which might weaken Twelfefinger's evidence in any way. So I decided to wait till Twelfefinger arrived here for formal arraignment before the local magistrate. Crane was safe enough. He was watched day and night by several detectives.

"As you know, Twelfefinger was due to arrive on yesterday's train. Shortly before the train was due in I had Tyson and Crane here in my office."

Here Weston gave a brief description of what had

occurred during his interview with the two, and Twelfth-finger's dramatic appearance on the scene.

"The moment Crane set eyes on Twelfthfinger," continued Weston, with a grim smile, "there was no doubt about their intimate connection. Crane jumped to his feet with an oath, and his hand shot like a streak of lightning for his automatic, which he carried in a holster under his left armpit. But Douglas and Wrenn, who had both been warned by me to watch for some such move, were too quick for him. He certainly put up a whale of a fight, though," remarked Weston with a reminiscent grin. "But he was soon overpowered. And on his body we found the automatic pistol I mentioned before, a vicious-looking black-jack and a money-belt. The money-belt proved exceedingly interesting. We found positive proofs that Crane had actually been concerned in the bank robbery. The black-jack was without a doubt the weapon he used for killing both Mitchell and Ware. Of course, we may have difficulties about proving his guilt as far as the murder of Sergeant Ware is concerned, though we have quite a lot of circumstantial evidence, as you can see for yourself. But as far as the bank robbery and Mitchell's death is concerned we have ample evidence to secure a conviction on the capital charge.

"Well, Mr. Grantley, that's the whole inside history of these affairs," concluded Weston with a smile. "I hope I have furnished you with enough material for an interesting story for your paper."

"Oh, excellent, excellent!" declared Mr. Grantley, glowing with enthusiasm. He closed his note-book with a snap and beamed on the inspector. "I'm very grateful to you, Inspector—very grateful indeed, for granting me this interview. Very, very kind of you. But if you will excuse me, I'll rush off. Have to get my notes put in shape for press, and fix up everything for an extra. This is the biggest scoop we've ever had. Good morning, Inspector,

and again, many, many thanks." He pumped Weston's hand with energy and enthusiasm and hurried out of the office, half of his brain busy with head-lines, while the other half wrestled with the important, arithmetical problem, how many copies he dared to print of this important extra.

And the same afternoon Mr. Grantley launched his big scoop. The article occupied the entire front page of the paper, and the head-lines were printed with the largest, heaviest types the printing office of the *Portage Bend Gazette* possessed.

MURDER MYSTERIES SOLVED

ANOTHER FEATHER IN THE CAP OF THE
R.N.W.M.P.

OUR LOCAL DETACHMENT DOES SPLENDID
DETECTIVE WORK

INSPECTOR WESTON GRANTS EXCLUSIVE INTER-
VIEW TO OUR REPRESENTATIVE

And little Mr. Grantley's scoop proved an indisputable, overwhelming success. The editor sat back and rubbed his hands, while the copies of the extra were literally torn away.

There was a veritable stampede of Portage Bend's citizens to secure copies of the paper, and the leading article was read with eager, all-consuming appetite and greed. And as soon as they had digested it a complete revulsion of feelings took place with regard to the Bancrofts.

Almost to a man, and a woman, the citizens boldly declared that they had known all along that Roy couldn't have been guilty. They knew he was not the sort of fellow to be mixed up in that kind of business!

And the ladies of the town praised the attitude Joan Bancroft had adopted. She had done exactly the right

thing. She had shown a courage and determination under very trying circumstances, which was unusual and remarkable for such a young girl. And it now transpired that they had all approved of her attitude all along. The reason why they had kept away from her was that they had felt she wanted privacy, and they had respected her wish. The one loudest in her protestations was Mrs. Horton. She couldn't praise "dear Joan's" courage and strength sufficiently. And whenever Joan appeared in public she was met with beaming smiles and gracious nods, while she had much ado to side-track mobs of gushing females, who were eager to proclaim their staunch, unswerving faith in her brother, even when things looked black against him. And at the same time they took the opportunity to praise Joan's exemplary conduct throughout the affair, while they explained the stand they had taken themselves minutely and comprehensively.

In short : Portage Bend was running true to form.

CHAPTER XV

CORPORAL WILLIAMS'S RETURN

A WEEK after these stirring events had taken place at Portage Bend, Corporal Williams returned from Prince Albert. His shoulder was quite healed, but the fact did not seem to fill him with satisfaction and pleasure. When he stepped off the train at the depot he looked glum and dejected, and there was a brooding frown on his face as he walked along to the barracks.

He received the boisterous welcome of his comrades with a weary, forced smile, and as soon as possible he left them and walked down the corridor to the main office.

"Hello, Corporal. Glad to see you back. Shoulder quite all right?" was Inspector Weston's cheery greeting, while Constable Douglas smiled his welcome from the corporal's desk across the room.

"Quite all right, thank you, sir. The arm is almost in full working order."

"Excellent. By the way, I hear young Bancroft has been led astray by our boys down in Prince Albert," continued Weston with a smile.

"Yes, sir. They got him interested in our job," answered the corporal, grinning in spite of his dejection. "He signed the enlistment papers two days before I left, and went straight down to Regina for his Rookies' course."

"Splendid!" exclaimed Weston. "Police work will serve as an outlet for his burning zest for adventure, and will keep him out of mischief. His sister was wildly

enthusiastic when she heard he contemplated enlistment. Oh, by the way," continued Weston, "our community has suffered another bereavement. Mr. Tyson has left us."

"Has he really, sir?" exclaimed the corporal, a gleam of interest in his eyes.

Weston nodded his head in mock sorrow.

"He has. That is the reason for all the crape and the general air of dejection you'll notice around this town," he explained with a broad grin. "I gave him a gentle hint, and he was wise enough to take it. I've also had a little chat with the various members of his late gang. I told them all we knew about their activities, and made it quite plain to all that at the first sign of booze-smuggling I would run the whole bunch in on suspicion. In view of my threat I rather expect they'll help discourage smuggling, so things will probably be quiet for a while. Though I suspect it won't be for very long," he added philosophically. "By the way," he continued, fumbling among some papers on his desk, "I've saved a copy for you of the *Gazette*. It contains the full story of our recent activities. Mr. Grantley has turned it into something of an epic. We are once more the blue-eyed boys around here. Here, take it, and enjoy it at your leisure." He handed the newspaper to the corporal, who took it and muttered his thanks.

"I told Grantley the story myself," explained Weston, "and it was a rather difficult and delicate task. You see, I couldn't bring the story of the booze-smugglers into it, as we had agreed to drop that affair for Bancroft's sake, in view of the services he had rendered us. Nor could I say anything about Sergeant Ware's unorthodox detective methods, and that we suspected that Bancroft had surprised the sergeant breaking into his home in search of evidence. Though we know now, of course, that it was Crane's bachelor cottage on the same street which was in all probability the object of Ware's attentions. Of

course, these necessary omissions made my story a little vague and thin in parts, but it is good enough as it is. The public literally gobbled it up. You run along and read it. I shan't want you this morning. Douglas and I have about finished all the routine work."

The corporal fidgeted for a bit, while he ruffled the paper he held in his hand. He looked highly uncomfortable and ill at ease.

"Excuse me, sir, but may I speak privately to you for a few minutes?" he asked hesitatingly.

The inspector shot a quick, searching glance at him.

"Oh, certainly," he said. He made a sign to Constable Douglas, who at once left the office and closed the door behind him.

"Well, Corporal?" Weston looked inquiringly up at his subordinate as soon as they were alone.

The corporal swallowed hard.

"Sir, I want to ask you if you would be kind enough to arrange for my transfer to another station," he asked, a little hesitatingly.

The inspector looked highly surprised.

"Why?" he asked.

"For personal reasons, sir," answered the corporal nervously.

For a few moments the inspector looked at him, a thoughtful frown on his face.

"Listen, Corporal," he said presently. "I know for a fact that your promotion to sergeant will be coming through in the near future. You know there is room for a sergeant on the establishment of this detachment, but if you transfer to another station your promotion may be held up. So if I were you, I'd reconsider the matter."

Williams shook his head dejectedly.

"I don't care for promotion, sir," he answered awkwardly. "I intend to leave the service on the expiration of my present term of enlistment."

The inspector looked completely taken aback at this announcement.

"What's all this?" he asked sharply. "Why this sudden and astounding decision, Corporal?"

"Because I feel I've no right to remain in the service any longer, sir," said Williams miserably.

The inspector looked utterly at sea.

"What on earth do you mean?" he asked. "Why do you feel you have no right to remain in the service?"

For a moment Williams hesitated, then suddenly he lifted his head, meeting the inspector's questioning eyes squarely.

"Because, sir," he said in a firm voice, "when you sent me out to arrest Roy Bancroft, I left with the firm determination to warn him and to give him a chance to flee the country."

"I see," said the inspector gravely. "And after you had warned him, what were you going to do then? How did you intend to explain the fact on your return that you had lost your prisoner?"

Williams's eyes sought the floor, while a dull flush spread on his face.

"I—I intended not to return, sir," he confessed in a voice which was barely audible.

The inspector inclined his head gravely.

"I understand," he said.

For a few minutes there was silence in the room. Weston looked at the dejected corporal, gravely thoughtful; but gradually his face softened. Suddenly he said briskly:

"Sit down, Corporal. I want to get to the bottom of all this. I know you well enough to realize that you didn't shirk your duty except for some very extraordinary and weighty reason. I want you to tell me all."

As the corporal seemed to hesitate, Weston continued kindly and quietly:

"Of course it is understood that you are going to tell me your story in strict confidence. I'm not listening to you as your Officer Commanding, but as your father confessor, let's say. Of course, I take for granted that it is only your regard for the ethics of our corps which has decided you to quit the police. You don't really want to leave the force, do you?"

"God forbid!" exclaimed Williams impulsively and with deep feeling.

"Good. Now sit down and tell me your story. Long association with all sorts of humans has taught me that our troubles are considerably minimized if we can only discuss them with others. If one keeps them to oneself and one goes about brooding on them, one is apt to magnify them past all proportion. So tell me your troubles, and between us we may be able to find a way out of the tangle."

Finally the corporal sat down stiffly on the chair standing by the inspector's desk. He looked nervous and ill at ease. For a while he looked down at the floor in silence, while he twisted the *Portage Bend Gazette* between his fingers. Weston waited in silence.

Suddenly Williams lifted his head and began to blurt out his story. He told the inspector about his regard for Joan Bancroft, told how he had decided by all means to save her from the disgrace and agony of seeing her brother occupying the dock on a murder charge. And he explained how he had started out in search of Roy Bancroft, not to arrest him, but to help him get out of the clutches of the police. And finally he told how Roy himself had foiled his intentions.

When he had finished the inspector sat for a moment in deep thought.

"Listen, Corporal," he said presently. "Why did you pull out in such a hurry that day you left here?"

"I was afraid you might have ordered me to take a

guide along, sir," confessed Williams. "And, as you can understand, sir, I intended to be alone under the circumstances."

Again Weston inclined his head.

"I thought that was the reason," he remarked. "But if you had waited till I returned to the office, you would have been spared a lot of misery, because I should have told you that I was about convinced of Bancroft's innocence. And I should further have told you to bring Bancroft in as a possible witness, and not as a suspect."

The corporal looked up quickly.

"You were convinced of Bancroft's innocence as early as that, sir?" he asked.

"Almost. Though I kept an open mind," confessed Weston with a smile. "Somehow I couldn't make Bancroft fit the crimes from the start. But I'll tell you all about that some other time. Just now we have other matters to occupy us.

"Well, Corporal," he continued seriously, "you know as well as I do, that according to the codes and ethics of our corps, what you intended to do was the unpardonable sin. We are trained to be mere machines in which human sentiment and weakness have no part. When the powers above say 'Do this!' or 'Do that!' we are supposed to do it without question or hesitation, whatever our own sentiments or opinions are. But a human being can only be turned into a machine up to a certain point. There will be times when our innate impulses get too strong for us, and the machinery breaks down. And in your case you were sorely tried. And speaking as a fellow-human, I can't blame you for deciding the way you did. I am afraid that the best of us would feel tempted to forget rules, ethics, and codes under similar circumstances.

"Now, in your case you were actually prevented from

carrying out your intention, so there is no reason why you take such an extreme, serious view of your lapse from grace. You brought in Bancroft according to orders, and by doing that you observed the rules."

"But, sir, even if I was saved from becoming a traitor to duty, in fact, I was certainly a traitor in intention," remarked the corporal gloomily.

"Well, even so, I can't see why you should reproach yourself so severely," said Weston kindly. "You have been brooding too much over the whole business, that's your trouble. And it has assumed proportions way out of reason. We all of us have wild impulses and intentions at times. And if we poor humans should walk around and regret and deplore all our unhallowed intentions which have never gone beyond that stage, the world would indeed be a sorry place to live in. I'm afraid the great majority of us would have to wander around in sack-cloth with ashes on our heads permanently. No, Corporal, if I were you, I shouldn't worry about what you intended to do, but consider what you actually did."

"But, sir, you seem to forget that I was firmly determined to carry out my purpose," said Williams. "It was Bancroft who actually prevented me. So it wasn't through any act of my own I avoided being a traitor."

"Even so, the fact remains that you carried out your orders to the letter, and that is what counts after all," said Weston firmly, sounding a little impatient. "It's only human to err. And I can assure you that you're not the only one of our bunch who has strayed from the straight and narrow path laid down in our manual. I'm afraid that if we all confessed our past sins and misdeeds, you'd get the surprise of your young life," he remarked with a grin. "There are quite a few skeletons tucked away here and there, full-grown specimens; so there is no reason why you should worry about your wee, undeveloped one. Lock it securely up in its cupboard and throw away the key. I tell

you, you can safely hold up your head and remain in the force."

"You really think so, sir?" asked the corporal, hope filling his eyes.

"I certainly do."

"And you don't think I'm staying on under false colours, sir?"

"Not at all. You just keep your skeleton well locked up and carry on. It would be absurd for a man to ruin his whole career over a small slip like yours."

"Thank you, sir," exclaimed Williams, jumping to his feet and standing to attention. His face was shining with relief and gratitude. "When you think it is perfectly all right, I shall certainly stay on. And I'm glad now I told you everything, sir."

"And it does full credit to your sense of honour, that you told me," said Weston gravely. "But what about this transfer you asked for? I think you'd better reconsider that matter."

The corporal's face fell at the inspector's words. For the moment he had forgotten his wish for a transfer and his reasons for it.

"I—I don't know, sir," he stammered in confusion. "I really think it is better for me to go to some other station."

"Don't decide in a hurry," counselled Weston. He had a pretty fair idea of the reasons underlying the corporal's request. The latter's story had given him the clue. "Think it over for a few days at least. Perhaps you'll change your mind. But whatever you do, stop brooding and think things over coolly and sensibly. That's all. Please send Constable Douglas in here when you go out. We have still a few things to attend to. And you take it easy this morning."

"Thank you again, sir," said Williams. He turned smartly on his heel and marched out of the office, head up and body erect.

There was a smile on Weston's face as he saw the corporal's form disappear through the doorway.

"What a much better place this world would be if we all had consciences as tender as that youngster's," he muttered to himself. "But what a drab, cheerless place it would be with everybody going around filled with regrets and laments and whatnots."

The corporal only stopped to exchange a few words with his comrades, then he left the barracks. He wanted to be alone for a while to readjust his ideas. And he felt the fresh, cold, winter air would help to clear his head, which was still in somewhat of a whirl after his interview with the inspector.

He was going towards the river, and was already some distance away from the barracks, when he suddenly stopped dead, an expression of perplexity on his face. He had just remembered that before Roy Bancroft had left Prince Albert to go to Regina, the latter had given him a letter to take up to Joan, and the letter was still in his pocket.

Now what should he do about it? he wondered. He shrank from delivering it in person. Seeing Joan again would only rip up old sores, which were far from healed. He still writhed inwardly when he thought of the scorn she had heaped on him during their last meeting. And circumstances had prevented him from rehabilitating himself in her eyes. To her he was still the ruthless, remorseless tracker of men.

No, he did not want to meet Joan Bancroft again and have to writhe under the scorn and contempt in her eyes. That was the actual reason for his wish to be transferred to another station.

But what should he do with Roy's letter? He couldn't very well ask one of his comrades to deliver it for him. He knew that would only cause speculation and comment, which he decidedly wanted to avoid.

Suddenly his face cleared. What a fool he had been not to think of that at once! Of course, all he had to do was to go down to the post office, buy a stamp, and forward it through the mail.

He at once altered his course, and began to walk towards the centre of the town, still occupied with his thoughts.

He turned down Main Street, and had covered half a block, when the sound of a well-known voice at his elbow almost made him jump.

"How are you, Corporal?" asked Joan.

The corporal turned quickly and saluted. Joan had evidently just stepped out of a shop-door as he passed. She carried a few parcels in her hand. She was wrapped in furs. The crisp, cold air had tinted her cheeks with a healthy flush, and the corporal thought she looked prettier than ever.

And she was smiling at him. Actually smiling in the old friendly way, without a trace of scorn or contempt in her eyes! But though this pleasing fact should have filled the corporal with confidence, it actually helped to increase his confusion. The unexpected is always confusing, even though it is agreeable.

"Oh—ah—how are you, Miss Joan?" he stammered. He felt awkward and flustered, and was quite convinced he looked the idiot he felt.

"Is your shoulder quite recovered?" asked Joan in friendly concern.

"Oh, rather. Absolutely. Right as rain. Never been better," babbled the corporal.

"That's fine. And how was Roy when you left him?"

"Quite all right. But you know, he left me. He started for Regina to go down for his Rookies' course—Recruits' course, you know—two days before I left."

"So he has actually joined the police?" asked Joan, a pleased expression on her face. "I'm so glad. I'm sure

that will be a career that will suit him. He wrote and told me he had half made up his mind to enlist, but I haven't heard from him since."

"Oh, I say!" exclaimed the corporal, pulling Roy's letter out of his pocket and handing it to Joan. "Roy gave me this and asked me to take it up. I was just on my way to the post office with it."

"To the post office?" repeated Joan, and Williams was acutely and uncomfortably aware of the surprise in her eyes.

"Well, you see," he plunged recklessly, eager to explain away his *faux pas*. "I—I didn't know whether I was going to find you in at this time of the day, you see, so I decided you would get the letter sooner if I mailed it."

Joan did see. In fact, she saw a whole lot more than the ingenious corporal suspected. For a moment she looked searchingly and hesitatingly at him, while he squirmed a little and called himself names under his breath for having made that nasty slip about the post office.

Suddenly Joan spoke.

"Are you busy just now, Corporal?" she asked.

"Not particularly. In fact, I have the morning off," he confessed.

"Have you time to come up to the house for a few minutes?" continued Joan, a trace of embarrassment and confusion in her voice. "I—I want to speak to you, and I can't say what I want to say here in the street."

"Certainly I'll come along," said the corporal promptly, almost eagerly. "Let me carry those parcels for you."

The moth had forgotten all sage intents and purposes, and was again heading straight and merrily for the burning candle.

While they walked along the streets towards the Bancroft bungalow, they chatted like old friends, as if there had never been any cloud between them. Their main topic

of conversation was Roy and his probable prospects in the police.

When they were finally seated in Joan's bright sitting-room, an awkward silence descended on them for a few moments; but with sudden determination Joan spoke:

"I wanted to tell you, Corporal," she began a little nervously, "how sorry I am for the way I behaved the last time I saw you. I—I'm more ashamed than I can say for what I said to you, and I have regretted every word ever since. But then you see . . ."

"Please, Miss Joan. It's perfectly all right," interposed the corporal hurriedly, pink with confusion. "I quite understand. And please don't apologize; there's not the slightest cause for it. I quite understand how you felt, and—and——" He floundered badly and broke off.

Joan shook her head slowly.

"I don't think you understand at all how I felt that day," she said gravely. "You see, down in my heart I suspected Roy of being guilty."

"What!" gasped the corporal, aghast. "You actually suspected Roy?"

Joan nodded her head with grave regret.

"I'm afraid I did," she said. "You see, Roy had been so mysterious and nervous for some time, so I was afraid something was wrong. Of course I know now what was actually on his mind. That disgraceful booze-smuggling he had got himself mixed up in. But when you came and told me about the evidence you had found against Roy, I actually thought I had found the true reason for his uneasiness and sudden flight. And in my despair I lost control of myself completely, and in the acute bitterness of the moment I said those things to you. And I think I also spoke as I did to try and convince myself of Roy's innocence in spite of my secret conviction. I'm afraid I'm expressing myself very badly," she ended with

an apologetic smile, "but I hope you understand what I mean."

"I do indeed," cried the corporal warmly. "And I really deserved all you said to me. I should never have told you about our suspicions at all. But then I was so thoroughly upset myself that I had blurted it out before I actually realized what I was doing."

"Now you're being polite, Corporal," remarked Joan with a smile. "You know perfectly well that I actually forced the truth out of you. But I want to tell you that I was about ready to die with shame when Roy came to see me at the inspector's house the night you returned from the North. You see, he told me what you had intended to do for him, in spite of believing him guilty, and . . ."

"What's that?" interrupted the corporal sharply, sitting up in his chair with a start. "What did Roy tell you?"

"Oh, everything. He told me that you had actually gone out to warn him and to give him a chance of escaping, and all that."

The corporal sank weakly back in his chair.

"Good Lord!" he murmured dazedly, dismay written over his whole face. "And he promised not to tell a soul."

"He told me he made a mental reservation as far as I was concerned," said Joan with a smile. "He was firmly determined to tell me. He said it would be good for my soul. He told me frankly that he had gathered from what you had said that I'd given you a tongue-lashing—Roy's expression—and, he added with brutal frankness, knowing me as he did, he knew it would have been a pretty hot one. I'm still quoting Roy. He finished his instructive homily by saying that the realization of my errors would probably be a healthy lesson for me, and might teach me to curb my tongue in the future. Oh, he spoke to me like a father. Anyhow," she con-

tinued soberly, "I was very glad he told me, though it was the last straw to my humiliation."

"And I wish Roy had kept his mouth shut," growled Williams. "But please forget all about it."

Joan energetically shook her head.

"I never want to forget the unselfish, noble sacrifice you were prepared to make for our sake," she said softly, looking pensively into space, while the corporal blushed and wriggled in private.

"Oh, please," he muttered. "Don't talk about it. I really did nothing at all."

"You did your best though," said Joan, a flash of humour in her eyes. "Roy assured me that you actually tried to force him to flee. But after all, it is not the acts that count, but the intentions. So you must permit us to be grateful." Again she looked pensively into space for a few moments. "Listen, Corporal," she continued presently, looking gravely at him. "Why were you ready to do this for us? Why were you willing to sacrifice your career and—and even your honour, for our sake? You see, I fully realize the price you would have to pay."

Again the corporal blushed and wriggled. He wished himself miles away. This was getting worse and worse, he felt.

"Well, you see," he explained awkwardly, "I wasn't going to stand idly by and see you getting mixed up in that ghastly business. I knew it would about have killed you to see your brother brought to trial on those gruesome charges."

"So your friendship for me was so great that you were ready to sacrifice all the things you treasured most for my sake?" asked Joan softly.

The corporal was never capable to explain afterwards where he found the courage which prompted his next words. He was inclined to look at it in after years as the bravest act of his life.

"It wasn't friendship," he said quietly. "You see, I happened to love you."

Joan looked completely taken aback at this bold statement, and a rich red flush flooded her cheeks.

"You—you——" she stammered in confusion.

"Please don't look so distressed," cried the corporal, already repenting of his rash temerity. "I know I shouldn't have said that, and I'm sorry. But it slipped out somehow. I know only too well that you can't possibly care for a chap like me. I know I'm not half good enough for you. But I simply couldn't help loving you, though I always knew it was hopeless."

Joan said nothing for a moment. She wasn't even looking at him. Her eyes were fixed on the carpet, but the colour in her cheeks persisted.

The corporal looked at her beseechingly, waiting for her to utter the words of forgiveness he was hoping for.

Presently Joan spoke without lifting her head.

"Are you by any chance a mind-reader, Corporal?" she asked in a small voice.

"A what?" asked the corporal in startled bewilderment at the unexpected, prosaic question.

"A mind-reader. One of those persons who can read other people's minds," explained Joan lucidly, without lifting her eyes.

"Of course I'm not. Why?" asked the corporal, completely out of his depth.

"Well, I was just wondering how you could know what other people thought if you were not a mind-reader," said Joan innocently.

"I—I don't quite follow you," stammered the corporal weakly.

"I was only referring to what you said a few moments ago. I mean, you seemed to be so certain of my opinion, and I wondered whether you considered yourself a mind-reader. Because, you see, generally a person who doesn't

consider himself a mind-reader asks questions when he wants to know what is in another person's mind." Joan's eyes were still steadily fixed to the floor, but as she spoke the colour in her face deepened.

A great and glorious light dawned on the corporal, and his eyes kindled.

"Do you—do you mean . . . ?" he stammered, between doubt and hope, leaving the question open.

Joan kept silent, but Williams discovered an almost imperceptible nod of her bent head. Quickly he jumped out of his chair and knelt down beside her, half putting his arms around her.

"Joan dear," he whispered, "do you love me? "

She lifted her head and looked at him, a soft, tender smile on her lips. Suddenly she lifted her right hand, put it on his head, and gently ruffled his hair.

"Of course I do, you silly boy," she answered softly.

That same afternoon Inspector Weston derived vast amusement from Corporal Williams's answer, when the former happened to ask him :

"What about that transfer, Corporal? "

The corporal looked at him blankly, his face registering a complete lack of comprehension.

"What transfer, sir?" he asked respectfully and wonderingly.

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